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PRIX BRENTANO

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1928–1929	*1929–1930*
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HILL OF DESTINY (*Colline*)	BURNT OFFERING (*L'Initiatrice aux Mains Vides*)
BY JEAN GIONO	BY JEANNE GALZY

BURNT OFFERING

Prix Brentano—1929-1930

FOREIGN FICTION

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ORIENTALE
WRITTEN ON WATER
THE LOVE LIFE OF VENUS

By Jean Giono

HILL OF DESTINY

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ENOUGH OF DREAMS

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JEANNE GALZY

BURNT OFFERING

INTRODUCTION & TRANSLATION BY JACQUES LE CLERCQ

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INTRODUCTION

IN presenting the second volume of the Prix Brentano series, the Committee no longer find it necessary to point out the purpose of the foundation or to stress its importance. Last year's award, *Hill of Destiny* by Jean Giono, proved sufficiently authoritative to perform the double function on both sides of the Atlantic.

There are, however, several changes to be noted in the administration of the prize. The death of Ambassador Herrick robbed France of one of its staunchest friends. It also deprived the Prix Brentano of an early and enthusiastic sponsor, who had seen in the award a further means of encouraging that amity between France and the United States which he had ever so sedulously fostered. His successor in Paris, the Honorable Walter E. Edge, has kindly expressed his willingness to serve on the Committee of Honor of the Prix Brentano.

Finally, the conditions governing the competition for 1930–1931 have been modified so as to include

not fiction alone but all other forms of literary endeavor.

Unlike *Hill of Destiny, Burnt Offering* is not a maiden work; it is, in fact, the author's eighth book and her fourth to carry off a prize. Jeanne Galzy has already published a tragedy in three acts and in verse, *Perséphone* (1924) and such prose works as *L'Ensevelie* (1912) and *La Femme chez les Garçons* (1917), both crowned by the French Academy; *Les Allongés* (1923), which won the Prix Fémina; *Le Retour dans la Vie* (1925); *La Grand' Rue* (1925) and *Sainte Thérèse d'Avila* (1927), a remarkable biography.

Born in Montpellier, brought up in the schools of her native town, a graduate of the Sèvres Normal School, a teacher by profession and, at intervals, an invalid by cruel necessity, Jeanne Galzy has continuously reflected her own life in her books.

Her first printed works were poems in such magazines as the *Grande Revue*, the *Mercure de France* and the *Nouvelle Revue Française*. At that period, Madame Galzy looked forward to a future as a poet and dramatist; but, on the advice of Monsieur Valette,

editor of the *Mercure*, she turned her attention to prose and, as so often happens, a form proposed to her by chance became her mode of expression.

L'Ensevelie was published the year Madame Galzy received her degree of Agrégée; it was, to quote the author's modest judgment, "a very bookish effort, still rife with all the influences of the authors I admired at the time: Maëterlinck, Gide, D'Annunzio." It was only in 1917 that Madame Galzy published her first notes of personal experience, in *La Femme chez les Garçons*. Among the extraordinary disruptions and changes brought about by the War was that which placed Frenchwomen in the unprecedented position of teachers in boys' high-schools. To an American, of course, the abnormality of such a situation is unfortunately not clear; to the French, the whole thing was fantastic. Out of her experience in the Lycée at Montpellier, Madame Galzy made a fine, sensitive book. A keen, trained sense of observation, a quick fancy and a kindly sense of humor make these pages vivid reading; but there are also undertones of a deep seriousness even in the gayest chapters. Already the author betrays her earnestness; she is conscious of the

high function of the teacher, of the isolation and failure to which he is so often doomed. Already, too, the phrase which gives its title to *Burnt Offering*—*"L'Initiatrice aux Mains Vides"*—occurs as the keynote of a moving passage.

It was with *Les Allongés* that Madame Galzy came into her own. This time the jury of women who award the Prix Fémina recognized one of their own sex—which happens less often than might be supposed—and Jeanne Galzy's name was added to a list which includes such authors as Edouard Estaunié, Roland Dorgelès, Raymond Escholier, Jacques de Lacretelle and Joseph Delteil. Further attention (some of it scarcely welcome) was drawn to the book through an injudicious propaganda from certain quarters which believed themselves offended. There was uncalled-for indignation in Berck-Plage, a sort of lay Lourdes, which was the scene of Madame Galzy's book. It was said that a sanatorium and the conduct of cripples with Pott's disease scarcely provided fit material for a book. As a matter of fact, the subject was no doubt bound to give rise to many and violent reactions; the more so, too, since the author was herself an invalid

and much of the writing autobiographical. But an unbiased examination of the work itself could not but silence such criticism. *Les Allongés* is at once one of the saddest and noblest books in French literature. There is no plot, no thesis; it is no journalist's portrait, either. Once again, the dominant qualities of Madame Galzy's thought—her scrupulous honesty and her burning love—come to her rescue. Here we are beyond literature; we are faced with human flesh and human souls suffering in hope of recovery or in despair of death. It is a book to put next to Duhamel's masterpiece; it offers a naturalism tempered with feminine sensitivity and tenderness. It has been called, by another woman writer, "a meditation on pain;" but it is more. Indeed it approaches the Christian concept of pain and announces both the pendant-volume (*Le Retour dans la Vie,* which treats of the return of the sufferers into the world of men) and the beautiful study of St. Theresa.

It is a far cry, from this mood, to that of *La Grand' Rue.* Except for the extraordinarily subjective manner of telling, the story is more objective than most of Jeanne Galzy's. The setting is the main street of Mont-

pellier, seventy-five years ago—a period and a background for Balzac. The book, divided into six parts, deals with six week-days. But this space of time is sufficient to unfold a whole series of dramas before our eyes, culminating in a murder (or is it a suicide?) when a man discovers his mother's incestuous love for her other son. Told badly, the tale conveys little; it is almost entirely in her manner of treating the theme that Madame Galzy triumphs. For she sees the drama in the nobleman's house through the eyes of the bourgeois across the street, and, especially, through the eyes of an observant though uncomprehending child. Thus she provides not only one supreme character hovering over everything—the Street—but also a brilliant contrast of social values and a unique opportunity for delineation of character. And, most important of all, this technique enables her to cast a nebulous veil over what otherwise would be unreal melodrama and shocking perversion. The reader remains in that sort of uncertainty which reality creates in life; but this uncertainty never for a moment interferes with the truth of the picture, with its moving grace and delightful fancy. Everything is suggested rather than de-

scribed and, so discreet is the author, that, in the end, everything is left at so many conjectures. While Jeanne Galzy remains thoroughly herself, the reader is tempted to compare her evocation of childhood with that of Collette; her recreation of the past with that of René Boylesve; her emotional simplicity with that of Estaunié. She is, too, in a sense a disciple of Proust. All is fugitive reflections; she sows shadows about her and creates her tragedy out of them.

As for *Burnt Offering*, the book will speak for itself. This is no place to enter upon a discussion of its various merits. It might not be amiss, however, to quote two statements by the author: "I have rubbed shoulders with many a Marie Pascal, and perhaps all childless women who teach are, in a certain measure, like her. I do not believe the case can be very different in other countries for, after all, the maternal instinct does not know the artificial limitations of frontiers."

Elsewhere Madame Galzy writes: "I am an ardent feminist. I do not see why women, who bear such weighty burdens in practical daily life, should not have the same possibilities and the same rights as men. A woman's right to love appears to me to have been

realized too certainly to require reaffirmation. It is rather woman's right to motherhood which requires championship. In the character of Marie Pascal, I have attempted to show upon what deep and sacred reasons this right can be founded and how many destinies of women suffer loneliness far less because of the absence of man than because of the lack of a child. I have merely stated the problem; I do not pretend to offer its solution in our society."

JACQUES LE CLERCQ

BURNT OFFERING

I

SHE brushed back the wisp of pale hair that had slipped out from under her bandeau—the very lock which, in her childhood, was forever streaking her narrow, listless face—and once more her pencil darted over the gray-lined sheets of foolscap. In the margin, to the left of the red, vertical line which damned back the broad, timid downstrokes, and separated the clumsy handwriting from her own swift annotations, she made new signs, almost incomprehensible to the uninitiate yet conferring approval, effecting a correction or voicing her indignation. As she scanned the childish scrawl, the symbols she traced upon these papers sped as swiftly, almost, as the thoughts through her brain. She was a woman young no longer, a frail silhouette seated by a table, her right shoulder raised upward a trifle, her head thrust forward with all the attention of a fisherman bending over deep waters.

She was indeed bending over deep waters. . . .

For, under this awkward writing, she divined vaguely, as though through a veil, all manner of indistinct feelings, of knowledge not yet awakened, of obscure and uncapturable dreams—a whole inner world barely beginning to emerge. The sheets of theme-paper upon which, as a watchful teacher, she noted her comments, were so many misty windows closed upon distant horizons. At times she would set off a sentence, probing it deep and with insistence, as though it were suddenly to open up, yield its hidden meaning and wholly reveal some one of these souls which, to her irritation, she knew so slightly. But the sentences remained steadfastly closed. Already they were frigid with conventionality, made up of words learned in the course of assigned readings; here all the most hackneyed commonplaces blended strangely with a childish stammering. Already, without even knowing it, the child was hiding under a social dress; already these little girls with new eyes were speaking old essentially empty words, such words as men make use of.

Marie Pascal started back. The silver pencil gleamed in her hand. The last words of her inmost

thought, flashing like lightning across her memory, pierced the shadows of the past. A picture rose clearly before her. She saw a pale face with salient jaws, shining cheeks and purplish circles under the eyes. And from under the visor of a soldier's cap, the glance of this phantom out of the past sought out her glance; his were gray, light eyes, clear as the waters of a pool, and heavily fringed with black lashes.

Such words as men make use of. . . .

With a shrug of her raised shoulder, she banished this ghost, so thin, so tall and so manful under his horizon-blue greatcoat. Once again she took up the sheaf of papers; once again the metallic pencil rose into the light, resuming its annotations on the left of the red marginal line, alongside of the great, labored characters; once again Marie bent over these rectangles of white paper that were as opaque panes of glass.

Every year, when school reassembled in October, she suffered because she felt out of her element among her young pupils. They were strangers. July always saddened her, separating her, as it did, from

those whom for nine long months she had borne close to her heart. To the teacher's calling she brought a querying tenderness; each year, she felt keener, richer; she embraced her whole class incorporeally in her closed arms. During the holidays, when she could rest again, she would bury herself in the village where her grandparents lived; but she always felt disaffected, as though a stranger. The routine of preparing her classes and of correcting themes, she missed cruelly; and the books she read in the poor room of her childhood (where she had worked so hard, years ago, in an effort to escape from the narrowness of village life) always inspired her with a desire to note her approval or dissent in the margin.

September drew to a close. The leaves turned red on the beech trees bordering the path by the enclosure; the chestnut trees on the Station Road formed a russet, dried trench. "It's over already!" the old people would say: "You're leaving us again!" Invariably, then, Marie saw the classroom in which she taught, with its walls washed gray, its oaken desks and the new little girls in their light smocks.

Her old grandmother would pause for a moment

and cease peeling the beets that stained her wrinkled hands purple. From under her black bonnet her sharp glance stared out at Marie without indulgence.

"You're healthier, to be sure; and you're stronger, too. Then you speak so little that you must have given your voice a good rest."

The old man drew deeply on his pipe, exhaled the smoke slowly, and:

"Certainly . . ." he said with feeling. "Certainly. . . ."

Once again the beets spattered their juice over the old, busy hands of his wife; and still Marie kept seeing the gray walls, the rows of desks. She would make efforts to banish the sight of the children she had taught that year, the little girls who would never be hers again; mentally, she tore herself away from the vision. For a second time, she bade them farewell, and a better parting it was than on Commencement Day when she had kissed them, one by one, as they stood there in their Sunday dresses—those holiday dresses which suddenly made them seem so very distant. For, the ceremony done, almost all of them were waiting for her at the door, frozen stiff with shyness, accompanied

by those vaguely curious, those so superficially grateful women who were their mothers.

And almost invariably the latter would say:

"Oh, Mademoiselle Pascal, you cannot imagine how much Mimi tells me about you!"

Mimi . . . Lulu . . . Nénette. . . . Childish pet-names spoken by mothers, names Marie had never heard, names never uttered in the classroom. . . .

Marie felt that the moment these little girls reassumed their real names, they re-entered upon their true personalities; that they had always been simply so many eager or bored little creatures, come thither to peck at a mite of knowledge but never for a second living their real lives in her presence. Further, those wide, questioning glances, in which she had thought to divine a feeling of attachment, doubtless meant to suck in as much useful information as they could, to learn the maximum hastily before roving further afield in search of other horizons.

The children whose mothers had said: "My daughter speaks constantly of you, Mademoiselle Pascal!" were about to be despatched in swarms to the lands of summertime, to the mountains, to the seaside, to

faraway villages. Each leap they made over the grasses, each plunge they took into the waters, each kiss their mothers pressed upon their cheeks would serve to efface the memory of their former teacher. Now as they saw the beginning of the term drawing near, they would no longer say: "Shall we see Mademoiselle Pascal again?" but rather: "What teacher shall we have next year?" A new allegiance would already fill their plastic souls side by side with that obscure desire (for all their transgressions) to submit to a discipline, to bow to a rule, and so soon—how womanly!—to belong.

A clock struck eleven. Marie Pascal stopped correcting her papers, laid them in a heap and rose as a nun might rise at the summons of a convent bell. She opened the window and went out on to the balcony to close the shutters.

In this rainy land of Picardy, the close of October brought a sense of release. The weather was mild. Below, under a dubious light, the deserted square reared the bared heads of its many trees. To the right, the paved street rattled as a truck rolled by. Already sleep had fallen upon the provincial houses. Above

them, the vast free sky hollowed itself out into depth upon silvery depth far into the distance where the Milky Way's pellucid stream grew denser and more turbid.

Marie drew a long breath. The odor of fallen leaves mingled with the stale smells from the kitchen of a hotel nearby; but, above all, she distinguished the savor of damp earth, of foliage rotting, of the moist country. For one second, she felt as though she had been raised above and beyond all time, as though faced with one of those luminous flashes which show us that we have not yet made our choice, that all life lies before us. Then, afraid of this impression, she shook herself out of her reverie.

"I must get up early tomorrow," she mused. "How cold my apartment is this evening!" For here, under the electric light, in this narrow room which served at once as drawing-room, study and dining-room, there was a chill such as she had not felt outside. It followed her down the little corridor. It made her shudder in the little empty room with the wide brass bed where she was even now undressing.

II

HER domain consisted of two sections of the Seventh Grade; they occupied the same classroom in turn and she taught them Literature, Geography, History, everything. Eight years before, when she had first arrived here, they entrusted the smaller classes to her as the newcomer. The other members of the staff shared the older girls in rotation.

Having established herself in the kingdom of childhood, first she became interested, then keenly attached to it. All in all, she did not enjoy much prestige. But would she have been a success elsewhere? That was a question often asked by Mademoiselle Hatsfeld, who had been Marie's teacher years ago and who like Marie maintained the freedom of her opinions.

She could not tell whether she were succeeding; she knew only that these children entrusted to her care took up more and more of her life every year.

Formerly matters of curriculum and routine had occupied all her attention. Now, however, her actual teaching had come to be a mere pretext for a more intimate quest: she was moved by the will to plumb these souls, to know them thoroughly, to guide them and in some cases, so she thought, to bring them aid. For in spite of what proofs to the contrary her experience might furnish, in spite of the fact that pupils promoted to higher classes forgot so quickly and now vouchsafed a greeting which grew more and more distant every year, on occasions the glances directed towards her were so pathetic that she could not but believe they were calling to her. . . . Of course she fell a prey to illusion at times when she believed in the permanence of this appeal, instead of recognizing it as but passing query. Yet what matter? Remembering her own feelings at their age, she was content to have helped these little girls to weather that difficult passage from childish innocence to the troublous stages of formation. It was a difficult transition for them, an anxious pre-adolescence, very apt, often, to destroy their equilibrium. And how disturbed these children became by what they might learn from life,

by what they must learn, and, indeed, tended to learn! The first stain on the whiteness of angels. . . .

Marie Pascal was very deeply moved by the thought of the blight threatening them. . . .

She walked into the classroom, as usual, with that light tread which always caught the girls by surprise before they had taken their places, while they were still scattered about, conversing in groups which betrayed the secrets of their personal preferences. She was annoyed to find that tall girl, Solange Hubac, chatting with two other more ignorant girls. She sent her back at once to the fourth row where she usually placed the brighter girls in order to maintain a certain interval between them and those in whom childhood still lingered on. Then she sat down and began to teach.

Their brown holland smocks, scarcely differing in size and shape, formed a kind of fourfold barrier of beating hearts; each word she uttered found these living targets. Again she felt the awful weight of her responsibility; she was filled with alarm as she thought of the possible answers her words might be furnishing to questions she herself did not know. She wondered

how she could possibly guess. So she tried again, just as she did each day, to pay attention to every glance, to every flickering eyelid that might denote incomprehension, to every twitching of slightly parted lips that might indicate surprise, to the obscure relaxation of the facial muscles that betrayed inattention and to the sudden radiant transfiguration of those upon whom the light of understanding breaks in a flash.

Forty lifted faces . . . forty souls on the alert. . . .

At times, Marie would bow her head, seeking the black rectangular surface of the table before her, as who might seek shade after having stared too long at a dazzling landscape. The end of the hour always came as a surprise. She felt that she had not yet been able to give enough of herself to these forty lives bound for an hour to her own life, steeped in her and fed by her, like plants which draw their sap out of the same tenebrous earth. Once accomplished, this dedication left her a little weary. She was vaguely aware of the forty pairs of feet treading the floor, of the forty living mechanisms precipitated into action,

and, amid the turmoil of their exit, of the forty holland smocks filing by in front of her.

She caught her breath, stared at the sky now visible again through the wide gaps between the heavy flights of clouds. Then other hastening footsteps approached and a fresh audience scaled the steps of the little amphitheatre.

Three and four times the human tide ebbed and flowed; three and four times Marie saw the sea of upturned faces change. The school day was drawing to a close. But one hour more and it would be over. . . .

Marie left, belonging once more to herself, to the town, to her own existence. She was surprised that this liberty always saddened her a little, as though she lived to the full only during the hours when so many souls drew their substance from her.

She walked through the gathered darkness along the façade of the Administration Building, newly restored since the War. The mothers were moving off, their arms around little girls who skipped up and down or strode gravely by their side, bearing the

heavy paraphernalia of school children. Some pairs —a slight shadow pressed close against the mother's —walked like two beings soldered together, one the exact reflection of the other. Childish groups stood about amusing themselves with gay chatter; from afar she could hear only their somewhat acid tones.

Yonder were houses for all this turbulent youth to enter in; lights to cast a radiance over family tables where these children prepared their home work; mothers, busied with the evening meal, to hush their gestures and to hold their peace lest they disturb the labors of their daughters. The whole town was peopled with houses which would close their doors upon a child at nightfall.

Marie entered the deserted square. On that side of the street which ran parallel to the school garden, the shop windows threw out long squares of light over the road, slippery with mud. She crossed, went into the shop where she usually bought vegetables for her evening meal. They were ready-cooked and invariably retained the taste of the cardboard in which they were packed. A lone electric light illumined the ladder-like stair of the narrow apartment house in which she

dwelt. The tailor, who lived over his shop and immediately below her, made so little noise that he might as well have been lodging elsewhere; above her, the third floor was occupied by a couple living modestly on their income. It seemed uninhabited save when the man's heavy steps rang on the stairway as he set out on his daily stroll or when the woman went out to buy household provisions.

The vast silence of the provinces encompassed her solitude. She would either correct the children's themes or plunge avidly into her own books. Escaping into the fictitious world which her readings created, she would hold converse with shadows—those of the writers whose works suddenly became so precious, so infinitely vital to her. But she was never tempted to communicate directly with a single one of those artists whose thought fell like manna upon her in her loneliness.

At each discovery, however, she would return instinctively to her young charges. She longed for the morrow, eager to impart to them as soon as possible the new truth she had learned, the subtle landscape she had seen depicted, the phrase which had en-

chanted her. She was like such hens as scratch the ground solely, it would seem, in order to enable the turbulent, downy flocks of their brood joyfully to share in their windfall.

III

MARIE found it difficult to remember fourscore different names each year; she devoted the entire first month to this task. She would learn them as one might learn a foreign tongue; she repeated them in class as she looked at each child, established guiding-marks in order to find them again, and was much disturbed when a change in seating threw her living checkerboard into disorder.

The fact that their hair was cut short after practically the same model gave all these little girls of equal age an air of kinship. Unless their faces happened particularly to arrest her attention, Marie first distinguished them by their figures. Thus in Section A of the Seventh Grade, she had immediately singled

out Solange Hubac, with her beautiful precociously feminine face, with that piercing clearness of glance when something happened to rouse her interest; at other times, Marie recognized her by the nonchalance of a bearing created out of poses instinctively prepared, by that grace which captivated all her companions and, during recess, made her the centre of a group obscurely but surely ravished.

Solange had a cavalierly way of asking questions: here already, Marie thought, was the imperious tone she would use when speaking to men. Never would she own up to a mistake or to a lapse of memory. When faced with reproof, she unfailingly adopted that absent air of an offended princess with which, in the future, she would meet suspicion or rebuke; and unfailingly she lowered her fine, somewhat bulging brow in a kind of impenetrable obstinacy, at once outraged and satisfied.

Seven B was Madeleine Legendre's class. She looked like a chick ill-hatched, with her mop of flaxen hair, with arms that were far too long and ended in knotted hands, enormous hands for her atrophied body. She was a boarder at school. A country girl and a victim

to peasant ignorance, she had managed to pull through a severe attack of rickets though she never outgrew her deformity. But she was lively, active, intelligent. Too intelligent, Marie sometimes thought, not to suffer; and at other times, intelligent enough to rise above her adversity. Accordingly, during the hours she had Madeleine before her, Marie took pains to give the child some motives of joy, to stifle her admiration for formal beauty, to insist, far more than she would otherwise have done, upon the joys of the mind.

Madeleine Legendre would listen to her, never in any way disclosing that she had tasted of the eucharist Marie was offering her. But Marie hoped that this principle was unconsciously stamping its wisdom upon her imagination.

Thus the two sections of the Seventh Grade were gradually taking shape about two beings so exceptional and so unlike that Marie never approached them in the same frame of mind. In spite of the similarity in the program of studies, she felt as though she were expounding two different teachings.

Presently, around Madeleine Legendre and Sol-

ange Hubac, other faces gradually emerged: in Seven A, Henriette Spire and Lucette Arnal, two little girls so well-behaved that they might have stepped out of the pages of a book for the edification of the young; in Seven B, about the small cripple, Alice Coutenier swiftly set off a hirsute head that should have been a boy's, Madeleine Hovelacque the delicate profile of a fragile child, and Sophie Desfossés the dark beauty of a Southerner, expatriate.

A day came when Marie knew all their names, was aware of any change in seating, recognized their gestures, distinguished their voices so clearly as to be able to address a merited reprimand for a mere whisper. Thereafter, she began to evaluate their intellectual gifts, to dose their memories, the keenness of their observation, their sense of intellectual order, the lacunae in such knowledge as they might have acquired. But she always speculated upon what must needs remain impenetrable in these little girls. . . .

To fathom children—what a strange task! How could this dimly lighted chaos within them be clear to such as have the habit of lucidity? Marie felt that she must relinquish her own psychology in order to

get to the root of this disorder which was a world in formation. At the threshold of these anarchical consciences, she stopped dead. How could these little girls who devoured the most stupid juvenile magazine with gusto possibly be the same beings whom sometimes she saw engrossed in the literature of men? Of what were they the reflection? What, indeed, were they?

She taxed her ingenuity to force them to lay bare their hearts. The titles of the essays she set were practically an appeal for their confidences. The obligation thus to practise a sort of professional indiscretion, as physicians do, was galling to her. And yet —was she not a physician of souls?

By degrees, she surmounted her scruples. The first subjects she set called for merely general impressions. Then she grew gradually bolder. There came a day when she dared to ask provocative questions. That year she inquired of one section: "What was the happiest moment of your childhood?" and contrastingly, of the other: "What is your saddest memory?"

Not without qualms, she collected their papers; the package seemed heavier than usual. She hastened

home, very eager to search into these little souls, to resolve these unknown quantities.

An entire section had replied to the question: Marie had read accounts of wedding breakfasts, of younger brothers' or sisters' birthday parties, all highly edifying evidence of kind actions; but, in the young faces her memory conjured up, she had read so profound a variance between the choice they had made and their sincere beliefs, that she could not but acknowledge her gratuitous intrusion.

"Tell about the day you made your first Communion!" Such, doubtless, was the advice given to Luce Ardouin by her pious mother as she braided the child's rebellious hair in an obsolete mode, tugged at her curls, subdued them under a round comb and crushed her laughing, rosy, dimpled face under a coiffure monastic in its severity. Unresistant, encouraged already to betray, Luce had written. . . .

Never a word had she told about an incident during what had probably been the loveliest day in her life. Marie remembered how she had overheard Luce giving a naïve account of it to a friend. There had been a game of hide-and-seek amid the hay; with in-

finite skill, Luce had managed to elude all pursuers and had savored the rapt anguish of hearing her brother cry aloud:

"Look in the well! My God! She may have fallen in!"

But no! "I hope to become a good Christian," the hypocritical theme asseverated. Yet the rosy dimpled face sang of quite a different hope.

Thus under a welter of pretence Marie searched for truth as who might seek a road choked under dense masses of brush. It was in the papers of Seven B that she found it. Had the melancholy of the subject evoked a sincere echo? Here were accounts of griefs which owed nothing to book-learning, sorrow was more prematurely discernible than joy, and the children had no need of relying upon the comfortable aid of their elders.

Of a sudden, deeply interested, she hastened through these papers, noting a sentence here, a phrase there. From almost all arose a living voice; her hand, resting on these papers, touched flesh, palpitant life, sweet and piteous human matter. One sentence especially arrested her attention:

"The saddest day of my life comes back every week: the day when Mother entertains her friends and I hear the sound of laughter."

Marie quickly scanned the context, read it through at one glance, returned to the revealing sentence, soared upward to the top of the page where the child had written her name, Annette Rieu, in a fine, careful hand. She closed her eyes, conjured up a face, and suddenly felt annoyed at herself because she failed to see it distinctly, lost, as it was, among the dozen or so faces which remained shadowy, which she had yet looked at intently enough to bear them in her heart.

IV

As Marie entered the room, the class rose to greet her. They stood still and erect, a curious multiform group, made up of girls of all sizes. Her glance, seeking Annette, travelled over their odd array, over the chequered surface of the unequal flock. Between

two swaying forms, Annette's head appeared, level with the shoulders of the girls who had hidden it; Marie clearly discerned the pallid, somewhat sunburnt face, the black straight hair cut in a fringe.

The class sat down. Now only at intervals, when the taller girls happened to shift, Marie perceived Annette's golden eyes, her small, straight and rather short nose, her gentle face, its charm, capturable only after the most careful scrutiny. Truly a child's face, the upper lip arched a trifle as though open over an invisible breast.

She was angry with herself because she had not distinguished her at once. So many days lost, so many weeks! Then, under her breath, she repeated the name Annette, delighted with her obvious redolence of childhood; with her narrow shoulders; with the small chest, very flat under the embroidered yoke of her smock; with her effaced and studious air.

She recalled the bitter confidence Annette had made; face to face with the child, she wondered whether her own imagination had not exaggerated the poignancy of this distress. How could this little round head have been bowed in so deep a grief? How had

the heart of a child retained so savage a sense of loyalty to the memory of her dead father that a mother's laughter could become such a torture? How could this breast, flat and as yet utterly sexless, nourish such an imperative need of remembering, such a revolt against the resumption of life, against the return of gaiety, against the eternal defection of the living?

Annette! . . . The virginal name bore a sound of beating wings, it was light as the flight of a bird.

Between Elvire Dacheux, a new girl whose romantic mother braided her long curls in the English fashion, and the pallid, well-behaved, unlovely Amélie Bosc, Marie caught sight of her; but when either moved, Annette, small and seated at such a distance, was necessarily effaced.

Somehow Marie must move her closer. The child was bent industriously over her desk, following the text; even when the older girls allowed an interval Marie could only see the lowered head. This irritated her, as though she already felt the urgent need of reading the reflection of her words on the mirror of this youthful face. But the order of seating is one

of those privileges which children guard most jealously. Marie dared not infringe habits of at least two months' standing which seemed to have created rights of property.

While dictating, Marie stood up; then, against her wont, she walked up the steps of the main aisle of the amphitheatre. She watched the slow-moving hands tracing symbols on the white pages, hesitant before certain letters, plunged in doubt, occasionally making a choice with a sort of frenzy. A little further along, in the third row, a small, reddish hand held a man's fountain pen. Was it her father's, Marie wondered? There was only one other child between them, for Annette sat very near the end of the row. Marie hung over the little bowed body. Everything about the child was clean, careful, tidy. Above the smell of the children, a blend of Eau de Cologne and fresh butter, Marie believed she could detect a faint odor emanating from Annette's newly-ironed smock, a hesitant odor of flesh too young still to possess its own distinctive savor.

She leaned over the back of the seats, as though to glance at the girls' work; pointed out a mistake to

Denise Arquet, who sat at the end of the section; bent over a little more. Now her breath almost fanned the dark, small head. She noted the quality of her straight, fine hair, its sleek, silken blackness, its thin russet glaze; her eyes followed the child's hand which was convulsively clutching the unwieldy fountain pen. She was about to speak her name just as she had called Denise a moment before; but her throat contracted and no sound passed. She started back, returned to her desk, sat down. . . .

Forty pens scraped over the papers. Each sentence Marie dictated raised an echo soft as a sigh; it was the incoercible lisping of childish lips as they repeated the phrase. Then, immediately after, neighbor furtively questioning neighbor to verify her knowledge. . . . Marie ordinarily kept an eye on this sort of thing and discouraged sidelong glances directed at friends' papers to see how they had spelled some difficult word. Yet today she saw nothing but the head discreetly bent over a page and the moving tip of the long black pen between diligent fingers.

For her own satisfaction, she re-created the story which the revelatory theme had suggested. Her own

memories mingled with her suppositions about Annette's life. The dead father appeared in the likeness of a soldier; for a moment he became one with the thin silhouette, the strong face and the gray eyes which she had loved.

Loved? Had she really loved? How could she tell, across the passage of time, diverted, as she was, by her profession, almost cloistered in her duties, a nun, now, by dint of solitude, of work and of austere living, forever estranged from her true womanly function, having nothing to expect of life beyond promotion, retirement and death?

An even life, she often told herself when, realizing how empty it was of the joys of her age, she sought for consolation. A straight, clean life, she added at other times, when chance brought her into contact with some wretched carnal intrigue and she enjoyed a kind of satisfied dignity because she had emerged so quickly and so safely from the parlous indiscretions of the flesh.

And there were thousands such as herself spread over the face of the earth, thousands of teachers living

lives as barren and as monastic. Though she was not on terms of intimacy with any of her colleagues, she gathered support from this certitude in so many existences similar to her own. It seemed to her that the teaching order girded her about as with an armor. She lived within it, she submitted to an unformulated rule, a votary consecrated to the education of children.

Thus in her eyes the distant Marie, she who had known weakness, compassion and passivity, became a kind of double, distinct from herself, even though it still haunted her; thus for want of any other experience, the swift encounter of a few weeks had assumed, in her memory, the importance of a genuine love-affair.

"Father died," Annette had written, "because he suffered too much during the War."

In a flash, she realized that had she had a child, it would have been precisely Annette's age, twelve years old!

All the while she dictated little short fragments of phrases in order not to overtax her pupils' powers and all the while she watched mechanically over tall

Huguette Dobelle, lest she copy, as usual, from little Yveline Allier, the clearest thoughts pierced through her hazy musing.

A small round body in her folded arms . . . a soft, warm body against her breast . . . the weight and shape of it, that odor of milk. . . . Then the soft hair of a two-year-old, its uncertain steps, the grip of the small, clutching hand, so tiny yet so strong. And the eyes opening in a question, the awakening of a soul; the awkward words, testing their power; those tears drawing down the tremulous corners of the mouth; that laughter, rising suddenly and warm as a bird's warbling; the whole divine mechanism of babyhood.

Unconsciously, Marie had stood up. Now she was walking up and down as she dictated, a prey to the pictures within her.

. . . The little neck appearing from amid white lace, the delicate grain of the skin—Marie felt them in her fingers' ends as she held up her book. Then the little girl blossoming out; her slimness casting off all unnecessary, soft roundness; the pure, sheer body; those tender inflexions in which the accents of woman are vaguely discernible; that reflection of herself

walking beside her, which she had seen so often as mother and daughter passed down the street together. Twelve years old—the age, had things been otherwise, of Marie's motherhood. . . .

The book lay quiet between her hands. And still she was dictating little short sentences. She was reading faultlessly, too; but not because she actually saw the book. A professional automatism governed her actions.

A ruler fell to the floor. She started. Then the pictures dissolved. She realized that she had walked forward down the aisle, close to the third seat, where Annette sat, writing. Suddenly their eyes met. In Annette's glance was a timid, questioning expression: it was one of those glances, terrible in their profundity, that seek, search, implore almost.

Marie, abashed, lowered her eyes.

V

FOR days she no longer dared question the child. She was fleeing before an emotion sprung within her

as sudden and as violent as that when a woman first experiences the prophetic tremor of her approaching motherhood.

And it seemed to her that her gestures were unconsciously making ready to rock something, to hold it on her knees, to clasp her arms about it.

She sought to forget. But into the emptiness of her deserted apartment, she was forever bearing a shape which grew constantly clearer and more overpowering: Annette, with her slight waist and her dark head; with the sound of her singing voice, a trifle shrill but shading of a sudden into deeper, graver notes; a voice still indistinct, hesitant in its movement like the flutter of wings trying themselves out in flight.

Marie would have wished to know the woman who possessed Annette, the oblivious, jesting mother. Yet to avoid meeting her, after class she made a point of tarrying in the teachers' cloak-room, a long room darkened, in spite of its two windows, by a wall which dominated the court below.

Her colleagues were hastening off. A vague absent-minded "Good-bye!" fell from the lips of Mademoiselle Audié—Mademoiselle Audié who lived alone

with a maid of all work, Mademoiselle Audié who seemed to have shed her skin and become a sort of teaching automaton, so unhuman was her aspect. In her cordial, authoritative voice, Mademoiselle Hatsfeld said: "Good-bye, Marie!" And Mademoiselle Weil-Lévy effaced herself in a murmur of farewell and a nod from under a hat which entirely cut off the top of her wan face, peppered with freckles and studded with a pair of pale, curiously luminous eyes.

Marie laid her books on the shelf of her own small part of the teachers' locker, picked up the papers she was to correct, took down her hat and coat, and slowly put them on. In order to waste a little more time, she usually lingered on to read the various administrative and corporative bulletins and to sign her name at the foot of notices or summons.

She hoped that the stranger would by now have led Annette away; she could not have borne to see the child leaving with another. The mere thought filled her with a strange agitation, of mingled suffering, jealousy, rancor and, suddenly, attraction,

She pictured her as frail, easily influenced and soon mastered, too young still to be Annette's mother.

Petite Mère. The name, doubtless her choice, betrayed her desire to be a sort of comrade to the child; it implored protection rather than commanded respect. Coquettish touches to Annette's dresses suggested a smart woman, a whit futile, shallow, a child-wife, like those charming out-of-date Dickens characters whom nothing can ever really affect. It would have given her pleasure to ask Annette whether she took after her mother; but Marie herself answered the question in the negative. Surely Annette perpetuated her father? This explained the child's devotion; her father was dead; thus, small and grave, she looked askance at the surviving mother as she laughed and chattered.

At other times, with a clutch at the heart, Marie would ask herself: what if Annette did take after her? Imagining the mother in the guise of an Annette grown-up, and faced with too nearly a double of the child, Marie suffered bitterly. At once she strove to conjure up the earlier vision of one of Dickens' child-creatures, a girl-mother, jesting and babbling with her friends.

At present she was filled with a curious confusion

when she came to teach: all the bashfulness of her novitiate returned to her. She prepared for her classes with a nervous ardor. She was determined to win the admiration of Annette.

The twoscore girls before her were now but a confused mass; she actually forgot Madeleine Legendre, the small cripple whom she had seated close to her at the beginning of the year in order better to shield her. Through habit, she first looked up at the chlorotic face, angular, like the body, with its broken vertebrae. But her glance immediately darted on, scanned the double barrier of children hiding Annette, peered through the gaps, sometimes pried its way between two swaying shoulders and, beyond, alighted upon a dark head with soft, straight hair or swift, furtive, kissed all the features of the childish face as delicately traced as those of a Japanese doll.

The girls left the classroom, each bowing her head respectfully; but Marie saw one head only. The motion shook loose two locks of hair, heavy, comma-shaped, which fell, suddenly, across her cheek. Annette's light movement as she shook them back into place brought a smile of tenderness to Marie's lips,

almost moved her to tears. It was such a gentle, young gesture, free as that of a kid frisking in the fields; it was so eloquent of childhood; it seemed to symbolize all Annette's innocence. And before such profound ingenuousness, Marie felt imbued with a tremulous respect.

VI

By a mere chance, she discovered that the meeting she apprehended so much, might perhaps never come to pass. Obviously Annette's mother did not come to school to fetch her daughter, because Annette possessed one of those cards which any pupil who went home alone must show to the porter before leaving. It had slipped out of one of the books which Marie found on her desk whenever she required a copy of the class texts. She had opened the book, never imagining that it came from Annette, who sat in the third row; the pink card, covered by a transparent envelope, had fallen to the floor. At first Marie did not notice the name; she was

aware of only the identifying photograph of a rather smaller, plumper Annette with chubbier cheeks. The hair, more youthfully dressed, parted on the side and cut very short, emphasized the difference still further. The forehead, free, lent the features greater indecision and immaturity.

From this picture, Marie could imagine a baby Annette. She smiled inwardly at the round face and, whenever Elvire Dacheux and Amélie Bosc allowed her to see Annette, she compared it with her present appearance, thinner and as though attenuated by thought where the delicate muscle of the cheek curved in lightly over the jaw, where the nostrils joined the commissures of the mouth in a fine slope, where the chin hollowed inwards under the lip a trifle before filling out in a sharp, pure line.

She questioned the class while her fingers ran over the glassy envelope, caressing this likeness of the past. She was careful, she did not wish Annette herself to know that she had recognized the picture and surprised a certain secret. She was even now exhausting the full significance of it. So Annette was not watched and protected at all hours? Her futile mother was un-

willing to interrupt her day by making regular journeys to and from school? She refused to time her existence to the rhythm of class hours? Yes, she lacked that loving apprehension which brings anguish to the more tender, suggesting a thousand and one possible dangers lurking in wait for the creature they love. Marie called to mind so many who escorted their daughters to school; who set out from home four times a day; who four times a day cut short every task or pleasure, haunted, as they were, by the fear of a motor recklessly driven, of a foot stumbling or of some evil meeting. She read the child's address, remembered it for all time.

It was a long way off; this might conceivably account for the apparent negligence of the mother. But Marie was too vitally interested in believing in the latter's indifference for her to interpret the child's freedom in any other way. She was gratified that the less Madame Rieu cared after Annette, the more of Annette was left to her, Marie. Though she was aware of it, a vague hope of possibly supplanting the mother stormed Marie's heart. The child's essay, with its confession of distress, impressed itself constantly upon

her thought; she was sorry she no longer had it, for she would have liked to re-read it, to extract all its meaning. Who knows but she had failed to grasp all of it?

Then, very suddenly, she felt she could not bear to have Annette so far from her. Elvire Dacheux and Amélie Bosc were sitting shoulder to shoulder, following the lesson out of the same book. Marie could no longer see Annette, but she kept a sharp eye on the two older girls who hid her from view.

"They will begin talking to each other," she mused, "I shall pounce upon this as an excuse to make them change their seats." Tall Amélie Bosc was keeping the place, her finger underscoring each line as she read it; Elvire Dacheux, her long English curls falling almost on the page, sat dreaming away in silence, possibly even listening.

Time passed. The bell dismissing the infant classes had rung some time ago; they were already at play; a shrill piping rose from the court below, striking against the frosty windows.

Marie had to raise her voice to be heard over this twittering rumor. Her pupils, exhausted by their con-

centration and disturbed by the noise, were gradually becoming inattentive. A scraping of legs betrayed their impatience; some of them began to talk. This particular moment of the hour, which Marie dreaded, was that when bad marks had to be given.

Alice Coutenier had already sent her pencil-box flying to the floor with one of her brusque, clumsy, masculine gestures. But Elvire Dacheux and Amélie Bosc remained calm, irreprehensible; no one save Marie noticed Amélie toying with Elvire's hair, twining the end of a long curl around the end of her finger. Amélie repeated the gesture once . . . twice. . . . She might possibly have recovered her usual poised immobility; but Marie committed her first injustice.

"Amélie, you have fidgetted long enough. In future, you will change places with Annette Rieu."

The order given, she bent over her book and continued to construe the lesson, sheltered by her work, protected against any outward manifestation of her joy.

But alongside of the verse she was commenting, though unable to contemplate the living child, she could nevertheless see the photograph under its isin-

glass cover. Her glance met that of the picture and she took possession of that vanished Annette, behind whom she could descry the successive likenesses, growing ever smaller and more touching, of all the Annettes of the past.

VII

THE children were already seated, when Marie saw that, in spite of her order to the contrary, tall Amélie Bosc had kept her place beside Elvire Dacheux.

"What did I tell you to do?" she objected. The class, accustomed to her gentleness, started at the harshness in her voice.

Tall Amélie, whose books lay open on her desk, closed them, gathered them up and stepped out of the line with obvious bad humor. Annette was ready, waiting; she had not yet taken her own seat. As she settled down in the second row, her small face shone, as though closed over a great joy.

Marie avoided looking at her too often; but she felt

her presence more closely. She ran through the lesson, amazed at her own happiness. So little seemed to have altered her life, yet that little caused a sort of revolution within her. Here for the first time, she had dared to correct destiny.

The day went by; the dismissal bell rang at four o'clock. For the first time, too, Marie put on her coat hastily. Outside, the early December night had already fallen over the street; the little girls were so many shadows across the cold mist.

But one of those shadows was walking along, bowed slightly to one side by the weight of her satchel. Bundled up in her winter clothes, she looked quite round and appeared to move unsteadily on her thin legs. Were she to press Annette against her, Marie thought she would feel that soft thickness of clothes, and smell the light odor of warm woollens.

At the corner of the square, the little girl was waiting for the street-car which was to take her to her home. Marie slackened her pace. Other children collected around Annette under the lamplight. Some were quite tall; the attractive Solange stood there with her knot of admirers.

A curious feeling filled Marie's heart. She began to walk more quickly, but the street-car, drawing up, hid the childish group from view. A moment later it rattled off amid a pounding of iron claps, and, to Marie's amazement, there was Annette, still standing on the sidewalk, bowed slightly to the left by the weight of her satchel, quite round on her thin legs. From afar, the little face smiled at her in greeting. Marie felt certain that Annette had stayed there to see her. Marie turned obliquely and, instead of crossing the deserted square as usual, walked along the grille, towards Annette.

The child stood at the same place, waiting for the next tram. A few laggard schoolgirls formed a new group. They spoke in loud tones, punctuated by bursts of laughter, but, as they saw Marie approaching, they were silent.

By now Marie was quite close to Annette. The young face looking up at her shone under the light of the street lamp.

"Good evening, Mademoiselle!" said the small, bright voice.

Marie hesitated. Then, a moment later:

"Good evening, Annette," she answered.

The child's name sang upon her lips; then it trembled in her heart, to lose itself, at last, amid the delight that welled up within her.

She dared not turn around.

VIII

FROM that day onward she never began a lesson without making (from afar and without moving) the gesture of a mother's embrace over the small, robust body of Annette. She pressed the child immaterially to her breast, caressed the small head, the straight hair, the bold fringe over the forehead; always she began her lesson under the glance of the golden, moist eyes.

No matter what she said, her voice seemed to take on a charmed gentleness. She, once so shy, so retiring, now blossomed forth with the most startling brilliance. She would be moved to pity, and the texts, three centuries old and so remote to their childish

brains, grew animate, of a sudden, glowed with life.

Yesterday, when preparing their lesson, the children had read merely so many words which first astonished, then baffled and finally left them bored; they had found these words inaccessible, foreign to their hearts, as though dead. Their inky hands had followed the lines of Racine's play as though clutching at an unknown, incomprehensible tongue. Today, here was Marie reading the prayer of Iphigénie and drawing tears from their eyes.

Alice Coutenier ceased chewing on the end of her pen-holder. Amélie Bosc raised her pale eyes, her lamb's profile to heaven; Madeleine Legendre inclined her pointed chin between her long hands. Instinctively some girls huddled close to their neighbors, as though to ward off a danger. And Marie, gazing at her class from over the top of her book, sought out the golden, dark glance in which each word she spoke seemed to sink as surely as though her speech were caressing Annette's long brown lashes. In Annette's eyes she detected the subtle shades of emotion; they burned with the bright flame of passionate comprehension. For the child hung breathless on Marie's lips and

Marie felt her own breathing governed wholly by Annette's reaction. A power was in Marie's voice, as mysterious as that power which sends a mother's blood running through the child in her womb; it bound her to Annette and made them one. Without material contact of any sort, divided as they were, by a row of desks and the barrier of all flesh, their understanding recreated the indissoluble fusion of woman and the life she nourishes. It was Marie's thought that enlivened the child, Marie's emotion that made the heart throb within that narrow breast. A sense of well-being and a pride made Marie start up.

Annette would be her child!

An illusory hope sprang up within her. Where other women failed, she would succeed; she would realize a destiny which, for all its apparent penury, would prove richer in accomplishment than other destinies. The fatalities of ordinary motherhood would not hem her about. For her part, she would not have to cherish a being whom obscure atavistic forces can render forever incomprehensible, foreign, hostile even. She would choose her own child; she would imbue it so

thoroughly with her own spirit that no barrier could possibly exist between them.

It seemed to Marie that, since all human thought has tended ever further from mere hazard and evolved towards conscious selection, a logical process must superimpose this new, radiant motherhood upon mere obscurely carnal reproduction. As for Annette, had she not herself chosen and, more even, implored for aid that day she had uttered the desperate confidence in her essay? In the child's case, might not the heart enjoy the privilege of selection over and above the fatalities of the flesh?

Dreams of her own childhood returned to her. Reared beside two old people, her tall, leathery grandmother and her crude, tender grandfather, she had many times imagined the mother she mourned. Who knows but the image she had conjured up was a complete negation of reality? What was her real mother like? Did she answer to this charming phantom born of Marie's desires? Was not that shadow, against which she often felt she was pressing her brow, made up of a piece with her need? And had not Annette also

dreamed this same dream of a mother after her heart's desire long before she had met Marie?

She would have wished to understand everything, to divine everything. She looked a whit anxiously at the wide shining eyes which stared up at her almost continuously during class; and in them she too sought for guidance. What must she become in order not to disappoint Annette? What exactions dwelled already within this heart?

For, side by side with her need of possessing, went a deep need of subjection.

IX

FROM that day onward, her life was radiant with expectancy. Every evening she longed for the morrow. The hours of her lonely existence, which she had formerly spent bowed over corrections or humble household tasks, listening to the mournful silence on the square, the confused noises of the street and the solitude of her heart, were now a dazzled impatience.

A richer blood seemed to course through her veins; a need of action surged through her and she cheated it by inventing additional tasks that would busy her with the child. What she taught Section A became virtually a rehearsal for the work with Section B, which was Annette's section. She tried the effect of everything she could imagine in order to render the absorption of grammatical rules easier, in order to save Annette an effort or to spare her fatigue. And she was happy when beautiful, indolent Solange rejoiced at some simplification or suddenly became interested in some reading. Solange, of course, was the most difficult of all to win over, because she must be torn from herself, from the care of her brilliant nails or of her young face, already heightened with cosmetics, from her constant happiness at being herself, at enjoying her every gesture, at each glance she cast into the pocket-mirror which she held out on her knees so furtively and which could so often be seen shining under the desk.

Indeed, Marie's zeal became so great that she contrived to take the copy books, previously corrected in class, home with her every Saturday. She would

pass walking down the street bowed beneath their weight; then, reaching home, she would scale the narrow staircase, and, exhausted, lay her load down on the table. This arduous effort had but a single purpose, namely to hold Annette's book in her hands for the space of one day, to rest her fingers where the small childish fingers had rested. Annette's fingers! Somewhat dubious, as those of even the most careful children, they left light traces of their passage over the white paper. To Marie, each of these marks was a delight all Sunday long. The impression of two fingertips appeared dully where the small moist hand had lain upon the glazed paper; Marie looked for the subtle design of the lines of the skin and, as she touched it, dreamed for a long time that their hands were touching.

It was the merest wraith of a contact but it served to nourish her heart throughout the whole December afternoon. Above the melancholy of a provincial Sabbath, of strolling about in one's Sunday clothes, of inactivity, of a poor, forced gaiety, her felicity gleamed radiant.

It was on the morrow of such a day that the Inspector of Secondary Schools paid her a surprise visit. These intrusions usually left her confused and stuttering. But on this particular occasion, her reverie of the day before stood her in good stead. She forgot her timidity; she spoke as though she were pursuing the inward dialogue she had held for hours with the absent child. Her words rang with such an eloquent appeal to their comprehension that the Inspector could not fail to notice it.

At the end of class, as usual, he received the various teachers whose classes he had inspected. One by one, the women trooped into the office of the Principal where they gave vent to their hopes and sometimes appealed for advice. Marie had no communication to make. The Inspector spoke the magic word Paris; he even volunteered to have her appointed to a post in the capital.

"No . . . please!" she protested passionately. Really, she was quite comfortable here; she had been brought up here, she had attended school here; indeed, with the exception of her year at the Sèvres

Normal School and the two years of her first post in the Midi, she had spent all her life in Amiens. She did not wish to change.

"I like the children here. I understand them better. I know who they are, what is best for them."

She was on the point of making good her escape, she stood on the threshold when the Inspector stopped her:

"If you should happen to change your mind, you need only write me a letter."

Mademoiselle Weil-Lévy was waiting in the antechamber: an emaciated face under the shadow of a hat. Marie went out quickly. She was afraid of breaking the tacit engagement by which she always found Annette waiting on the curb, by the tramway-halt. The child was still there; but, as the car drew up and she was pressed for time, she had to climb in. From the platform she nodded a faraway greeting: her smile drew the merry corners of her mouth down as low as where the two dark strands of her hair encroached upon her cheeks.

X

THE last light of a gray day etched these women's faces out harshly as they sat about the Principal's office in a circle. All of them seemed dull, wan; though they were of all ages save that of youth, they all seemed to have been fashioned after the same model. There was something austere about their clothing and the correct severity of their attitude. Marie, somewhat to one side, leaned over the book in which, being the youngest, she had to keep the minutes of the official meetings. Marie considered these familiar strangers, the oldest of whom had, in the past, been her own teacher.

Save for two or three groups of friends, who by drawing their chairs closer together had given proof of their usual fidelity, each individual seemed quite apart even in this restricted circle. Here, too, the solitude of their personal existences still endured; perhaps, in fact, their rigidity of attitude was no more than their habit of always moving alone, never inclining towards

others, never bending down for a kiss, never following another being with their eyes.

As always, there was a sort of confused rumor before the meeting began. Late-comers hurried in murmuring vague words of apology. The circle of chairs widened. Old worn-out bags appeared; notebooks were opened and spread out on knees. Then the Principal, a sallow, flabby woman, who was buried beneath heavy shawls and who looked as though she had been piled up on her chair, shook the bell. Someone turned on the light and the meeting began.

The pupils were seeded one by one, their names placed beside the rewards they had obtained. There were discussions over such cases as had doubtful claims to entry on the Roll of Honor. Then faces rose, voices affirmed. In passionate accents, Mademoiselle Hatsfeld, inveterately vehement, would cry out: "I oppose that!" or "I am in favor!" Occasionally, her colleagues, infected by her zeal, raised their voices. Madame Livron, who had been a widow so long that it was almost impossible to take her for anything but an old maid, settled the debate in a dry voice; in

difficult cases, she always demanded a show of hands. Then the Principal not only counted the *Ayes,* but, in a spirit of caution, made the counter-tally as well.

They began by considering the pupils in the senior classes and finished with the youngest. One by one these girls (already living who knew how tragically?) were enumerated alphabetically . . . Bacheron, Bardin, Brugnol. . . .

Marie, who had known them as children, tried to place them in her mind, to recover them. She would have liked to ask Madame Livron: "What did you do with the child who was so sensitive to poetry, the one who almost shed tears one day over a passage of Samain's? And that other child who recited Francis Jammes with such feeling?"

But Madame Livron, with open book, was busy adding up her marks and knew nothing beyond her own certitudes.

And the judgments based on these figures were always so widely at variance with her memories, that Marie wondered whether she had not deluded herself in believing she was discovering such brilliant promise in their young souls, or whether her pupils, having

grown to adolescence, had not gradually shed their childish souls to become no more than beautiful shapes born of a precious chrysalis now dead. By an inverse process, how many pupils had now risen to distinction, who when Marie knew them, were so mediocre that she had sworn nothing would ever arouse them from their torpor.

Her own classes of course, marked the frontier between childhood and adolescence. She could not possibly tell whether a child would remain herself in the new universe that lay before it. The secret labor of age, bringing one to rich development and blighting another, always astonished her far more than any physical transformation. What a wealth of children within a shade of genius who became colorless and insignificant women! How would Annette emerge from this psychic molting? And was it not sheer folly to build upon this shifting sand?

Then such sharp anguish swept over her that she forgot to record the result of the deliberations. Madame Hatsfeld had to call her back to order with a "Well, Marie!" which plunged her back into the past when she herself had been a pupil at this same school.

It was smaller then, both in size and numbers; a melancholy barracks for children who looked like orphans with their wide black sateen pinafores, those indestructible pinafores which were lengthened out every year, which led from almost infancy to almost youth, and above which appeared Marie's palish face and an auburn braid as lustreless as her face.

"A pupil of whom nothing was ever said," Mademoiselle Hatsfeld liked to repeat about her.

They had reached the Eighth Grade in their discussion, working down through the upper Classes, and now they were descending still lower. Names and faces of pupils were much closer to Marie. After all, she had not been able to take back so soon from her pupils of last year that part of her heart which she had given them. When she happened to meet them in the corridors, it always seemed to her that they had somehow strayed out of her classroom. When her colleagues judged them, too, she always felt a curious desire to give her advice, as though the protection she had exercised over them were still the only legitimate one. Nevertheless the little girls were already far from her; that fine selfish impetuosity with which

children make a clean sweep of their light pasts and give themselves anew, bound them to other leaders.

At last the discussion came down to her own pupils. A sense of discomfort, of shyness prevented her from raising her eyes. She was afraid she would blush at the mere sound of Annette's name. She forced herself to look down at the minute-book with an air of concentration as great as her detachment had been hitherto. In order to avoid uttering the beloved syllables, she affected never to use the girls' Christian names.

It was fortunate that Annette was also one of those pupils "of whom nothing is ever said," a mild, diligent pupil, and, save in Marie's classes, retiring. Yet Marie's heart still beat with apprehension. Who knew whether one of these faded mouths might not suddenly speak the fragrant, light name? Which of these austere women would suddenly reveal to Marie some unobserved flaw in the passionate, pure child?

Mademoiselle Weil-Lévy always chose the hour when they discussed the Seventh Grade to ask for permission to retire. In its air of effacement, her thin flat face possessed so much secret authority that the

Principal never objected to her departure. Besides, everyone knew that she was ill, that she suffered. Marie did not know the nature of her mysterious illness; among all these faces with deadened features, these faces from which all light was so often absent, she could never account for this face, at once paler, even more lifeless yet more radiant than the rest.

There remained only one class to discuss; the names of those destined to be Marie's charges next year echoed through the melancholy office. They were anonymous like the wretched printed paper on the wall, the green carpet, the walnut closet and the faded curtains of the Principal's office. Yet they clothed small, living girls.

In previous years, sometimes Marie had leaned forward to gather these syllables as though to read her destiny in them, to guess what manner of souls were to be entrusted to her in the near future. She had smiled at the sound of the pretty Christian names as who might smile at auspicious promises. This year, however, she met these new names with secret aversion.

Next year—or rather sooner still, in a few months

—they would file through the door which Annette liked to hold open for Marie; they would tread these boards on which she passed with dancing feet; they would sit down before these desks amid which was her desk. Her desk, her chair, her place, a stranger's. . . .

XI

SHE might have found some excuse to bring Annette to her house, but she did not dare. Yet nothing could have been easier. Mademoiselle Hatsfeld always had a host of little messengers ready to run errands for her; she often invited them to tea, stuffed them with sweets, and let them dance at her house. But Marie was too timid, too reserved; she had never admitted the children into the intimacy of her life, however close they had been to her heart.

Her taste for solitude was such that on the rare occasions when some mother wished to talk to her, she never received her at home but met her at school,

after classes. A sense of modesty made her guard her three little rooms, decorated in a taste already outmoded, which had indulged in Renaissance prints, Greek art and subdued colors.

"Your sitting-room is just like yourself!" Mademoiselle Hatsfeld had once said in the course of her annual visit. "It is discreet and gray. Things speak in low tones here. You have not changed; you are still the same silent child that used to pronounce German so badly because vigor is needed to do so."

Now she regretted that she did not possess this cordiality, and that she could not keep open house. She could have received Annette there among others; she would have had the joy of seeing the child within the walls which circumscribed her life.

The town was taking on life as Christmas neared; the shops bore an air of festivity. Holidays already, one term already gone by! One week more and, as usual, she would be with her taciturn grandparents, in the tiny village nestling at the foot of the bare hills, beside the river, heavily opaque with frost.

In the Rue des Trois Cailloux, women stopped to look at the displays of toys and jewelry in the shop

windows. Some were bound homeward, bearing gifts in brown paper parcels. Marie suddenly thought of the immense pleasure there must be in choosing Christmas presents. Some dolls caught her eye; she stopped and picked the doll she would have given Annette were Annette her own child.

One was quite round, with the somewhat bulging belly of a three-year-old baby and a charmingly candid expression that could not have failed to delight Annette. But did Annette still play with dolls? Marie wanted to make sure. Accordingly, for the next essay, she asked the children what gifts they wished for Christmas; and every evening, after class, she walked up the same street to keep an eye on the window. The doll was still there. It was very expensive, no doubt; its price saved it from the covetousness of other mothers. Or perhaps none really understood the infant charm of its white voile dress embroidered with rose, of its heavy head with blond, silken hair neatly parted and gathered in two little short braids.

Marie looked forward to the children's essays; when at last they came, she read Annette's immediately.

"I do not need toys any longer," the tall, painstaking characters said. "Father gave me my last doll. It is not a toy any more but a relic. I could never love another doll."

Marie was greatly disappointed; she felt almost jealous that the dead man deprived her of an opportunity of indulging the child, as though she really could have made this gift. She was sorry that Annette's tastes were so old for her age; she was angry with herself for having set a question which betrayed how vastly Annette differed from the other children.

Annette loved books, nothing else. It distressed Marie to see how much too discreet her little essay was beside the others'. What a catalogue of covetousness! The boyish Coutenier asked for a bicycle; Solange for jewels; the little cripple, already tempted to adorn herself, dreamed of a golden necklace; the two little girls who were too good to be true begged for cradles; and Huguette Dobelle, who always copied from Yveline Allier, hoped for a toy grocery-shop.

Regretfully Marie abandoned the doll with the two blond braids. . . .

Christmas drew ever nearer. Branches of holly

adorned the humblest shops. The teachers' terminal meeting had taken place in the gloomy office of the Principal, the latter presiding grotesquely. She was a woman who found it difficult to express herself; she lacked the slightest prestige; and it had seemed as though Mademoiselle Hatsfeld, whose trumpeting voice, at once authoritative and cordial, dominated all the others, were conducting the debate. That evening Annette had bidden Marie farewell as usual and the clumsy tram had moved off down its path of fog and disappeared into the darkness.

On the morrow, Marie would see Annette smile once more; then days and days would go by without her, far from her. She would not know the joy of contemplating the small face, of hearing her young uncertain voice changing from deep to high register with a birdlike chirping.

Marie walked up the Rue des Trois Cailloux again to put off the return home; to avoid seeing her suit case, packed for departure; to forget that she must go. She went on, gazing at the shop windows as she passed, repeating her tactics of the last few days,

when she had spent hours of illusion tasting the shadow of a forbidden joy.

The big doll was still in its place, with its infant air, its bulging belly, its delicate painted face, its eyes somewhat far from the nose, its cool, voile dress.

"Annette does not like dolls," she mused. Yet she went in.

A moment later she emerged and moved off into the mist, bearing a long box under her arm, like those mothers who have found their Christmas presents and bear them mysteriously home.

XII

WHEN much later Marie was to recall these holidays she had dreaded so much, these ten days spent in the poor setting of her childhood, in the tiny village, with the two old people, she thought of them as of a blessed halting-place. Her new passion sang of hope; a certitude of fulfillment dwelled within her.

She sat down in the vast rustic kitchen amid the odors of a meal simmering on the stove. They always forgathered here in the wintertime to avoid keeping up several fires. The grandfather puffed on his pipe; occasionally he would speak the spare words of men who are powerless to express themselves. His wife active and dry, stood by the stove, preparing the meal with all her natural promptness of gesture and that air of authority that admitted of no compassion. Marie meanwhile worked at her knitting and abandoned herself to her dreams amid the tobacco smoke and the savory fumes of the sauces.

She forced herself to stay there in the evening to cheer the old couple by her presence.

A few hours ago she had gone out. She had tramped far over the open country, over the frosty crunching ground, in the calm of a winter that hovered over the earth like a slumbering breath. Very soon she would retire to her huge bedroom, crouch down beside the fire of crackling pine logs, and, for a long time, postpone the hour of sleep.

During the three or four hours' interval after she

returned from her walk and before she retired, she lived once again exactly as she had in her childhood, seated by the kitchen table over which in the old days they had always spread a newspaper to protect her home work from the grease-stains. Now, as she sat there, Marie tasted that serene detachment from contingencies which young fiancées enjoy. They are promised to a new destiny. They are there, yet they are there no longer, for their thoughts, spreading out towards the future, make them strangers to everything about them. None the less, they are more keenly than ever aware of all the shapes about them, precisely because they are half-separated from them. Thus never had Marie seen so clearly the battery of copper pots (newly polished in her honor, no doubt) or the dents in the copper kettle which had been banged about so often and which as a child she had once let fall when it was filled with water. Nor, again, had she ever noticed so distinctly the streaks on the oak of the old table where knives, in so many years, had traced such a complex network of lines as they cut through the bread. Similarly, she had never

looked so much at the clock in its long, fumy box, nor at the beating of its sun-shaped pendulum, whose very rays she had counted.

She stood on the brink of a future; everything was in upheaval, remote, acute. Habits were broken. She discovered the old, familiar things, for she herself was quite new among them. Indeed she was another woman.

Nor was she any longer that mild, self-effacing spinster who drew all her experience of life from her books, but rather a woman who had abandoned reading and knitted by the fire to lull her thoughts to sleep. Or even she who stops knitting and who looks. Not only at the things about her and at the two oldsters, but beyond. A woman utterly new, tremulous, rejuvenated.

"You're stronger and healthier than ever!" the old man said with surprise.

"Your classes don't tire you out nowadays, eh?" the old woman croaked somewhat sourly. She had never taken the teacher's fatigue seriously because the only weariness she knew resulted from laundering and ironing, from housecleanings and overhaulings,

from digging in the kitchen garden, and also, because she was mistrustful. What hardship was it to sit in a chair all day? How weak the girl must be to complain of that! Such a sedentary occupation!

This year Marie had not complained a single time. Not once did she say: "I have a headache!" Not once did she say: "My throat is always sore."

She sat there, still as a stone. She did not knit now. She did not look at anything. She was simply remembering. The little face raised towards her . . . the swift gesture she was unable to repress . . . the firm little cheek . . . the child's great sonorous kiss . . . and that soft, heavy odor of the clothes pressing against one as one kisses a little girl. . . .

XIII

THE holidays passed by and school reassembled. Once again Marie found the little flock of holland smocks, the heads at various heights, the odor of newly-ironed linen, the fresh zeal. Ten days' holiday

of visits, meals, rest and boredom with their families had proved but a slight distraction from school life. They were happy to resume their regular habits, their collective existence and the very discipline which they had missed without having had time to shake it off. They were not at all like the insubordinate little girls who returned so different from one another at the end of the summer holidays, after ninety days of freedom had given them back a personal life. In January, on the contrary, harmony was immediately restored; from the second hour of teaching onward, Marie could not believe she had actually left them. The ten days of her own vacation shrank as though folded upon one another, reduced to nothing. But, at that age of sudden changes, the interval had been long enough for Annette to have grown. She had gained a brighter complexion and lost a certain childishness of gesture. Marie thought her shoulders had broadened, too. Was the adolescent about to emerge from the little girl?

A moment ago, as she had lowered her head, the two locks of hair had fallen over her cheeks and she had had to brush them back. Now hers was no longer

the delightful movement of a young kid frisking but rather that pensive gesture of a hand taming the rebellious hair and gathering it back. The gesture of a woman. A gesture Annette had seen her mother making every day for ten days. Marie suffered bitterly at the thought. For ten whole days, Annette had belonged to the other woman, to her alone.

Yet the expression of worship in the brown eyes raised towards her had not altered; Annette's glance glowed with the same concentrated and luminous joy. Marie confirmed this and her jealousy vanished. The child drank in Marie's words as though her eyes absorbed them, as though they glided in between her lashes to reach that mystery which is a soul. Nothing had qualified the communion that existed between them.

In the evening, the child kept their unformulated appointment; Marie saw her standing on the curb in the very spot where she had wished Marie a Happy New Year and where Marie's arms had closed about her. Today they exchanged the usual nod and smile from a distance. Everything was recovered; absence had destroyed nothing. Marie returned home buoyed

up by the joy of having felt that reality answered to her hope.

She tidied up her apartment, removed the dust that had accumulated during the days of abandonment, performed her customary duties, prepared her supper and ate it in the small silent room; she breathed more freely without the distraction of a stranger present.

The doll lay in its long box under the chair where Marie had placed it when she left. Now, in a more sober mood, she almost regretted the useless purchase and, seeking a place to hide the toy, she removed her books from the bottom shelf of a cupboard. Then, yielding to the desire of seeing the doll again, she took it out of the box. She smoothed the twin braids of silken hair; on her knees she felt that weight, that volume, that counterfeit of a child. Her hands knew a kind of joy as she touched the body with its slightly bulging belly, the roundness of the silken head, the childish figure, and her arms, pressing that idol against her breast, accomplished the never-ending gesture that her barren life had not known. . . .

XIV

A CHARMING tacit understanding rose up between them so that, when Marie Pascal was on the point of opening a door, a small hand opened it from behind and the cool, joyous voice bid her good morning. Marie's "Thank you, child!" was like an impalpable kiss laid on the cheeks raised towards her. A mysterious instinct seemed to measure the length of the corridors so exactly that Annette never lost an opportunity of crossing Marie's path; often too, as she went downstairs, Marie surprised Annette's head bent over the banister, her hair dangling on either side of her little face, and her eyes following Marie's progress for a long time.

In spite of the rivalry among the other pupils, stimulated by such fervor, Marie always found the necessary book on her table, open at the proper page. The stove crackled, filled with coal by small, invisible hands. The chair stood squarely in its place in front

of the desk which had been dusted off with the corner of a small, light smock.

For Annette seemed to have communicated something of her heart to all the small beating hearts under these light smocks whose lines evinced the angel shapes they covered. Something of Annette's ardor burned in these little, flat, pure breasts under chains bearing medals of baptism or First Communion or, at times, the somewhat heavy peasant crosses given by some grandmother who lived on the wheat and beet plains yonder in one of those primitive cottages of boards and clay, where the clods of turf burn slowly, emitting a dense smoke redolent of mud, of dry furze, of stagnant damp: the odor of Picardy, a land of rain-drenched soil. . . .

XV

ALL that had formerly repelled Marie in the austere countryside seemed now to be adapted to her personality and in intimate harmony with her life. She for-

got how in the past, during the years she spent at boarding-school in Amiens, she had felt grievously oppressed by these endless plains where the sky was white grist, a moving sea, life in suspense. Now she discovered a certain charm to these melancholy horizons; she appreciated their matchless play of light, so subtly and delicately diffused by clouds flying ever low.

Since her return, now that she went out on long walks, eager to enjoy the country again and to hold converse with earth and sky, a vague sensation of space permeated her being. A damp wind blew in from the sea, palpitant with tremors of infinity. Earth itself, violently plowed up and raised, as it were, by waves, seemed to curl and coil in a movement monstrous as some breath from an abyss. Sparse trees rose, black and shining, like jutting rocks; and the small pollard willows, rolling at the bottom of a slope, looked, for all the world, like great round pebbles. Marie breathed deeply, filled her lungs with all this fury.

At other times, she would stroll down toward the vegetable gardens. Beyond the last houses of the

workmen's suburbs, the Somme widened out, forming a region half-land and half-flood; small islands heightened in contrast, extended between the icy maze of the waters.

This countryside seen through the fog was subtly shaded with tones of gray, shades of lead and silver, fumy and dull browns. The withies and reeds shook their frosty culms by the edge of the water, imprisoned with ice and recognizable only by its metallic sheen.

This countryside, sketched with an economy of line comparable to a Japanese print, this earth that lay waiting, and this water still held back, moved Marie deeply. She felt a premonition of the hidden life covered prudently by the frost; she knew what rich verdure spring would bring to birth on these plots of earth, rising, with their borders of withered grasses, out of the heart of the waters.

Sometimes the setting sun burst through the clouds; then the canals crackled with purple and golden enamelling. Marie would retrace her steps toward town. Lights twinkled through the mist. Marie smiled at her fits of melancholy in the old days when, as a schoolgirl, she had been forced to walk along these

roads with her companions in files of three; when she had felt such acute distress well up within her, that she dreamed of any way of escape, even in death. Suddenly she wondered whether the child was destined to know the same lack of balance, the same dismal hopelessness of adolescence; whether Annette, too, were to suffer from them as bitterly as Marie had through the long winter days of heavy clouds and empty horizons. She walked faster, hastening toward the town where Annette (in what unknown setting?) was diligently learning her lesson for the morrow. Marie would have liked to know whether Annette's ingenuous soul were not already sensitive to the melancholy of things; a need of protecting her quickened Marie's pace as though, by returning home, she could possibly sit down beside the little girl, and, raising the small dark head towards her, contemplate the delicate face and say:

"How beautiful are the gray sky, Annette, and the winter hoar upon the roads and that shining mosaic of icy water fissured with frost. You must not listen to people who speak of the mournful aspect of things. Everything possesses a beauty of its own. All is joy.

But you must understand, you must understand quickly, so as not to have time to suffer. I shall tell you. . . ."

XVI

OFTEN she imagined what her return might have meant if, instead of Marie's pushing her door open on the silence of her deserted rooms, a joyous hand were suddenly to draw it back. She could hear the steps of little, padded slippers dancing their dance of youth along the dark corridor. They were banal, these three rooms of hers, two of which faced the Public Park and the third, looking across a hoof-shaped court, the bare trees of a hotel garden. Yet in them an enchantment brought Annette to Marie's side.

Annette would have studied her lessons under this lamp, the heavy locks of her hair falling comma-shaped over the middle of her cheeks, her little hands resting on her open book. Marie saw, to the point of hallucination, the somewhat square short-nailed fin-

gers of dubious cleanliness, stained here and there with ink, and of a touching immobility on the pages of her lesson.

At other times, the little light-clad phantom sat down by the stove, in the low, rustic armchair on which Marie occasionally stretched her feet, but which, most often, she left empty before her, in order to set Annette's strong little body upon it. What would the two say to each other? Would the child understand the wealth of this love offered up to her youth? Would the expression in the depths of her luminous, brown eyes lose any of its adoration? What would she tell the beautiful, crimson mouth, vivid as a full-blown flower?

Marie sat still, listening to the silence, which yielded, presently, as the child's voice rang in her ears. It was not distinct words she heard but remembered intonations, those singing ends of phrases with a slight accent of the soil, those tender, thin notes on the threshold of laughter. Then the tones of Annette's voice when she had ceased to recite her lessons, when she addressed Marie directly, in a voice grown suddenly more guttural, hoarse with emotion, a voice

which was hers so soon and which would be hers as a woman.

Time passed. Filled with joy and hope, Marie would play at that game of remembering which bereaved mothers accomplish tearfully, like a rite. Evening came on apace; the shadows fell. Then Marie removed her books from one corner of the table, spread a napkin over it and settled down to her supper; and the missing child would eat beside her, with gestures Marie did not know, studiously, and, she hoped, with gusto. There would be certain dishes she preferred, dainties which Marie would cook especially for her. She would say: "Mmm! that's good!" as children do when they enjoy food.

Then, the meal finished, she would begin her solitary vigil beside the small, invisible companion. Marie corrected the class essays, setting Annette's aside after having pounced upon it hastily. One by one, she read the themes of the others, the strangers. And she could still imagine the child of her choice working silently beside her in the circle of the lamplight.

She bent without the least ardor over these clumsy writings; all that had formerly quickened her unsated

heart was now spent. Yet she still loved these children who were hers to guide. Their names, written in the margin, conjured up their quizzical images. But Marie had exhausted her curiosity. She no longer waited, expectant. She simply corrected their work, automatically, like a conscientious teacher.

The little clock struck ten. For a long time now all had been silent in the town save for the occasional step of a traveller making for the hotel nearby or, on the far side of the square, the rattle of a truck over the cobblestones.

The stove snored on; a sense of the peace and well-being of home filled Marie's heart. Now was the hour when mothers helped an awkward small girl to undress, when they kissed a brow already prisoner to sleep.

Leaving the overheated sitting-room and entering her bedroom, she found it icy-cold. Mechanically, Marie undressed, then sought refuge between cold sheets in the wide empty bed. Warmth came only gradually. For a long time she would read under the bright electric light; then, feeling sleep come on, she turned it off. And sometimes, one moment before fall-

ing into unconsciousness, she would stretch forth her arm, as one who reaches through the darkness for the blessed warmth of a small, massive form, heaped in a dreamless sleep.

XVII

MARIE had always tried to waken the children to the greatest beauties she herself knew. She disdained the school texts; she sought within herself for what she loved best, in order to adorn their memories with it. It pleased her to think that much later they would repeat the texts that held the most moving poetry, perhaps without even knowing to whose vigilance they owed their knowledge of them.

Sometimes she suffered when the chosen poem failed. But what joy was hers when she heard the faltering voices repeat the words which established in their childish souls, and for the rest of their existence, the most divine creations of the brain of man. She was charging them for the future; she was pre-

paring the eucharist for them. Never once did she dream of following their infant taste. She soared with such a persuasive ardor toward what she admired that the children followed her, even those who used to read children's magazines on the sly. In her classes, during these few hours, they leaned forward, bewildered yet attentive, and so often won over, projected, as it were, out of themselves, beyond themselves, into the world of a suffering, singing humanity that celebrated the universe and discovered its heart.

By means of a sort of incantation she led them into mysterious realms, which, in their inexperience, they had never known. The avid, swift-consuming flame of her passion kindled their hearts, brought them speedily to maturity. It never occurred to her that she might be thrusting them into life too soon, that their infant hearts possessed an enchantment of their own, and that the sleep in which many of them seemed to languish might be a useful preservation.

But now, as she scanned Annette's lively features, she knew doubt for the first time.

Was not the anguish of death too heavy a burden upon breasts so small that the embroidered yoke of

their smocks fell in a single horizontal line? She had seen Annette's distorted countenance as she read Lamartine's *Crucifix.* What thoughts were laboring under the heavy fringe of black hair, what picture rose before the deep, candid eyes?

Marie avoided whatever might have revealed a world of sensuality closed to their childish purity. But was there not another candor to respect? Should she have read *Les Pauvres Gens* and allowed these little girls to see what wretchedness was? Should she have dictated that harsh poem of Verhaeren's *L'Effort* to make them realize the sorrowful, ceaseless labor of humanity?

Should everything that constitutes the life of men intrude upon the artificially mitigated atmosphere in which children are reared? Or were fairy tales to be the only motives of their dreams, the only universe half-apprehended beyond their fictitious daily world? For the universe in which all these children lived was certainly fictitious, a manner of limbo never visited by the slightest glimmer of true light, of genuine misery, of real life.

What had she done when she opened the door upon

the vast horizon? She should have respected the stained windows, the warm hothouse atmosphere, the puppets which adults create for the use of children, indeed even the lies with which they are pleased to clothe themselves in children's eyes. On one side the guardians of law, irreproachable, indefectible; on the other, childhood, which was submitted to sin, sorely tempted, faulty, which must be ceaselessly restrained, and before which the adult must set himself up as an example. Should Marie adhere to this deception or should she allow them to judge for themselves?

Moreover, should she suffer them to know everything that might reveal blemishes, vices or merely want of grandeur in even the literature of school texts?

Racine frightened her; Corneille alone provided a certain assurance. For deep indeed was the faith these children laid in the all-perfection of those respectable beings, armed with authority, who governed their little lives. It was perhaps dangerously deep. Might not Molière and La Fontaine undermine it with the amused smile of men whose minds are made up on all human wrongs and imperfections? Again, was not the

moral rigidity she taught them actually a thing to fear? Would they not use it as the touchstone of their disillusions? These little eyes looked out at life with such candor and boldness that tomorrow they might well discover some baseness in life and detect the weaknesses of those who raised themselves up as examples. They would learn all and judge all. Should they not therefore be taught indulgence, in order to save them from disgust, from the severity in which many children immure themselves, distrustful and forever closed?

All manner of scruples assailed her, and, especially, a new feeling of respect, almost of admiration, for these ingenuous souls. In a sense, they had now become her leaders. Old memories of her religious training returned capriciously to her one evening; she understood why Christ suffered the little children to come unto Him and why He promised the kingdom of heaven to such as were like them.

She avoided certain thoughts as rigorously as though the young eyes had been able to divine them. Annette's deep veneration became her constant rule; she submitted the most secret instinctive portion of

her life to the possible exigencies of this ignorant purity. She was guarded, made healthy, purified by the child. The temptations of the solitary had vanished with regrets and even memories.

She went so far as to seek to discipline the fascination which possessed her. Later Annette would understand why, from then on, Mademoiselle Pascal entrusted others with the coveted duty of running errands. She no longer always accepted Annette's book. One day, when Marie, at the end of the corridor, was about to push the door, a small hand opened it from within. Marie had to repress the maternal gesture with which she would have bent down toward the child. Formally, she asked Annette to cease leaving the body of her companions and coming to meet her contrary to classroom regulations.

Surprised, Annette raised her golden eyes; they were filled with tears. An expression of childish grief came over her; Marie moved hurriedly away. She had conquered the temptation of tenderness.

And she believed she had become worthier, thereby, of the worship the child bestowed upon her.

XVIII

THE school went on living its normal life about her. Four hundred children moved to and fro or sat in silence, just as usual; groups of pupils listened to the words of plain-clad teachers, in such unchanging order, that a throng of light smocks seemed attached to each of the dark initiators.

But Marie no longer perceived this collective existence. The colleagues she elbowed every day became more and more shadowy. Mademoiselle Hatsfeld's voice alone sometimes tore her from her dream; occasionally, too, Mademoiselle Weil-Lévy, by dint of effacement and silence, imposed her freckled face and the wan light of her glance upon Marie's consciousness.

In class, in spite of Marie's efforts to show interest in all her pupils, she did not notice beautiful Solange growing ever more beautiful or dark little Sophie Desfossés suddenly shooting up. Nor did she realize

that a mysterious spring was already dawning in all these young hearts.

A rainy, bitter February was just ended; while the damp countryside was still all mud and mist, these children moved about the warm classroom like early flowers. The little cripple carefully spread her new gold necklace over her narrow chest; the two model little girls softly polished their nails on their smocks; the boyish Coutenier flattened her coarse hair with a jerky movement.

Their very essays were alive with a spirit of regeneration. Imagination and sensibilities rose in these little girls like sap. "They are improving," Marie said to herself and as official opinion declares, "The pupils make special progress during the second term, when they are still benefiting by the discipline of the first few months and have not yet tired of their efforts," she was not surprised.

The fourscore essays now invariably held some revelation: a novel picture, a fresh discovery. An uncertain genius blew furtive sparks upon them, and this genius was collective, it belonged to no single

individual but was at the service of all. It gushed out from even the most inarticulate. It was the most stolid girl of all who wrote of "the rain with its little dancing feet" and, that same day, a child who came in by train from a neighboring village every day set the first nosegay of daffodils upon Marie's desk.

XIX

SPRING was indeed at hand in spite of the persistence of cold, rain and squall. It was dawning in the country, whence the children were always bringing in new flowers. They did it ostensibly, laying on Marie's table a handful of primroses, redolent of soil and moss, or rods of black boughs glittering with downy buds.

Marie thanked them and carried her booty of branches home with her, delighted with the new leaves and their tender fragility. She smiled as she fingered them, as though they had been tiny hands of newborn children, all wrinkly still and soft. And the

children, sensitive to their grace for the first time, also began to contemplate the young branches.

March was going by. One day, as Marie sat down at her table, she found a great branch of hawthorn, like a cloud of flowers. As she sought whom to thank, the silence of the class astonished her.

"It's an anonymous gift," the boyish Coutenier chaffed.

Annette, her head bowed over her book, blushed. The beautiful ball-like branch looked like a whole bush. Marie noticed that it had been clumsily lopped off; the tip of the branch had been hacked with a blunt knife. She looked at Annette's hands; there were no cuts on them but a few somewhat swollen scratches streaked the brown skin. One, in particular, traced a vivid furrow around her thumb, isolating it from the hand and making it appear contrastingly shorter, with its closely pared nail.

"Did you hurt your hand?" Marie asked as they went out.

"Oh no, Mademoiselle."

The child's denial was joyful, satisfied, triumphant; as Marie saw her eyes shining, it occurred

to her that Annette had wished to hurt herself for her sake.

She moved off down the corridor, her confusion increasing at every step. She was frightened at finding in this child of her choice her own taste of sacrifice, her own propensity to self-torture. Was it because they resembled each other or had she already unconsciously molded her after her own image?

And did she possess the right to do this? At home, in her exiguous apartment, as dusk fell over the square, she wondered about this. It was already a tardy twilight; the days were drawing out. Soon light and noise would have banished the dreamy, still hours during which Marie, torpid with warmth, conjured up Annette's presence. Marie dreaded the approach of summer; she would have liked to prolong the mist and the whole wintry atmosphere in which her love had grown.

Outside, a breeze shook the nebulae of green dots fashioned in the air by the buds of branches. The street echoed under the harsh rattle of passing automobiles. The façades of houses shone, as lights, veiled

in gay, vivid colors, were turned on above the family table.

In all these hearths, there were mothers who surrendered instinctively to their love; who never questioned themselves; who closed their arms about a child as they covered it with kisses; who gave orders and reprimands, thoroughly at ease in their occupation, never for a moment suspecting its duties and delighting to prolong their egoism by fashioning their child in their own image.

Marie envied such thoughtlessness and such power. In her own case, she knew only the scruples of her love. Her own precarious motherhood enjoyed no abandon whatever and it was tormented by every form of doubt. Was it true that mere flesh and blood conferred every right?

Her idealism protested, yet it seemed to her that she was accomplishing a sort of usurpation which only a moral superiority could make legitimate.

And what was she but a creature made of common clay? A weak, acquiescent creature who, like others, knew a need of joy, who nourished passion in her

breast, who had accepted this austere, bare life solely because of her timidity?

She sought to judge herself, perhaps to lessen herself in her own eyes. Memories rose out of the past she had thought buried and forgotten. Twelve years: what were twelve years to efface her memories? They dwelled within her flesh; they had become her substance; and they held her forever prisoner of her past.

Suddenly she thought of Annette's *Petite Mère*, the unknown rival whom she could imagine only through the child's essay. Her laughing image, so long banished from Marie's mind, reappeared with all the charm of those childlike women who go through life with an incorruptible innocence; it imposed itself ineluctably upon her consciousness. Who was the worthier of the two?

XX

MARIE would have liked to know her.

When, after school, she descried the child from

afar, leaning against the grille of the square and looking towards the street-car, sometimes she found herself hoping to see the coquettish childlike woman. Now that the weather was fine, she thought that Annette's mother might perhaps make the school the objective of her stroll and that the day would come when, like so many mothers, she would return from a shopping tour, laden with seasonal purchases. For the public of mothers increased proportionally as the air grew milder, inviting people to emerge from their close rooms, to walk in the streets, to stroll along the avenues where the lindens, still black under their thick buds, looked as though sucked by myriads of fat pale-green insects.

But the little silhouette always went alone.

The child, free of her heavy winter clothes, had lost her appealing plumpness; she was delicate, svelte, with legs a little too long, like most adolescents. The mere sight of the black-and-white checked coat made Marie's heart beat faster.

The hour at which Annette was awaiting her, the child's smile and greeting in the distance, brought her a daily joy. Gradually Marie had acquired the habit

of leaving school at the latest possible moment; this allowed the other pupils time to move off, leaving Annette all alone, yonder, against the grille. It was as though their distant intimacy were destined to be sweeter without witness.

As she pushed the gate of the square, never once did Marie yield to the temptation of changing her course and approaching the child; for her part, Annette had not attempted to accost Marie all winter long. But now, as slowly as a bud unfolds, Annette abandoned her stand by the lamp-post where the car stopped, drawing nearer to the square gate and insidiously every day shortening the interval between herself and Marie.

One evening Marie heard the thin, piping voice quite near her murmur a greeting.

There were birds singing on a tall hawthorn tree which was beginning to flower. Marie bore away forever within herself the double picture of the pink tree and the pink face of the child. . . .

XXI

ANNETTE drove back her tears and obeyed Marie's order. Now she never leaned over the banister as Marie walked downstairs; she never waited in front of the square; and during recess she played (or pretended to play) with her companions. From afar, Marie felt Annette's glance divining her, following her about, most of all when she could not see it.

The fact that the distance between them was greater drew them together all the closer. Doubtless it was this that maintained Annette's courage. But her face had become graver. She was serving something which she adored and respected: Marie's will.

"People can also love through their suffering," Marie read in an essay on *Le Cid*, and trembled at the words. Then, further on, a statement which made her wonder whether the child had perhaps guessed everything: "Chimène wishes to destroy the Cid because she loves him."

Were there certain children who could fly straight

to the goal and acquire, as it were immaculately, a comprehension that the subtle adult heart does not often attain? Was it one of Marie's thoughts which the child had guessed and appropriated? Marie could not possibly tell.

Who could prove the extent of her power over those she taught? She was unaware whether it was limited by the spoken word or whether it grew constantly deeper, so that every word was a mysterious seed which rose and grew into the most unforeseen tree.

Marie re-read the conscientious essay, marked how faithfully every prescription had been respected, from the material disposition of these lines, traced by the light thin hand of a child, down to that invisible discipline of the mind, which bowed already to the rules. A miracle even more mysterious than the shaping of the child within its mother's womb. Here thought developed and found sustenance, attached first to the teacher's thought, then independent, freed from the link which bound them together, and moving forward with no uncertain force toward a personal experience.

Marie admired this creation.

There were exhausted mothers who hugged their newborn child in the crook of their arm, in the hollow of their shoulder. Marie rocked the four pages in her hands. The same dazzling discovery of personal power was hers; and, beside her usual hesitancy and fear, the same movement of pride. Here was her daughter.

Just as mothers look in their newborn for traces of themselves, enjoying all that resembles them and happier still in the promise of a greater beauty, so Marie looked in Annette for what was Marie.

Her own picture emerged from the depths of the oblivion to which she had consigned it; she descried her colorless complexion, her gray eyes, her lacklustre hair, bound tightly in a long braid, falling over her black pinafore. She began to question this little dead girl in order the better to admire the living. For the first time, she wished she could have known what she was like as a child. But only externalities appeared; out of this distant past, she seemed to possess only such incoherent, confused images as we retain of our sleeping dreams.

Even Marie's first attachment—the dazed, misty

affection she had entertained for her village teacher, transferred and later dying without Marie's feeling a real wrench at the time—recurred only fitfully, much as, at night, a corner of the landscape appears in black-and-white relief, almost void of all life, under the white light of a projector.

Through a vague blur, she remembered a school garden, doubtless the teacher's private ground. In this garden, which led to a plot of abandoned orchard-land where the branches of apple trees swept the earth, a dress, newly washed, hung on a rope. Marie could not recall the form of the dress or anything else except a blue, swaying sleeve, which she had at first barely recognized because the wet material was of a darker hue. But she remembered bringing her lips against the hanging sleeve; she remembered the kiss she had pressed upon the wet material, and she remembered her confusion, the swift glance she had cast at the house to see if she were being observed, and her mad flight under the green branches.

Did Annette know anything of the furtive kisses a child bestows almost ritually upon everything that has chanced to touch a sacred shape? Had the books

she lent Marie become shrines that bore the relics of Marie's imprint? Or, free from puerilities, did Annette love with all the gravity of one precociously matured?

Nothing in her own hazy childhood, Marie thought, could assist her in divining Annette. She perceived no quality in her own heart as a child by which she might measure Annette's excessive heart. In her rustic inexperience, mingling, as she had, with farmers and petty peasant officials, she could have found nothing of what Annette had discovered as through an aristocratic choice. Annette's soul possessed subtleties beside which Marie, not only in her youth but also throughout her whole, sorry life, knew nothing but awkwardness, gaucherie, penury.

And suddenly the supreme anxiety welled up within her. This time it had nothing to do with any particular situation nor was it in any way concerned with her terror at assuming a rôle in which flesh and blood played no part. It was beyond and above all contingencies. In this absolute province where Marie forgot she was a teacher and Annette a pupil, she a woman and Annette still a child, Marie, supremely

anxious, asked herself in all humility: "Can I live up to her expectations? Or shall I fail her?"

XXII

AT Easter, she returned to her grandparents'. Once again she readjusted her life to her childhood background; once again she renewed her acquaintance with the huge easterly room, the plain board floor, the whitewashed walls on which she had hung a few pictures when she first became initiated to art, the old massive bed with posts blackened by time, styleless save for its solidity.

She put flowers again into the vases she had brought back years ago from Paris, in her student days at the Sèvres Normal School. She laid down the imitation Persian rug and the flowered American eiderdown which her grandmother always wrapped up in paper during her absences. The old woman was filled with respect for these novelties, for the luxury

they typified, for their sumptuous air; yet the sentiment was nevertheless tempered by a faint contempt for their uselessness.

From the shelf, where they awaited her side by side, Marie took down the books she had loved so well, opened them again, and tried vainly to take some interest in them.

The invasion of a great emotion estranged her from everything that was not strictly essential to it. Ingenuity of style or the pathos of some situation no longer touched her; the glassy prison in which she dwelled admitted no light save that which emanated from Annette.

When she went out, her only company was the dancing shadow of the child. A shadow which was not shadow but rather light. It sped along the road beside her, ran down to the low river, bent over the soft verdure of the elm-trees, gazed long at the dead-water, saw the reflection of a milky sky, dancing, too, with light flaky clouds, and it returned toward the village, its arms filled with flowers. . . .

And yet Marie had known love once. It was during the War. . . . She had just been apppointed to a small provincial school installed in an old lordly mansion in the heart of a dead city of the Midi. She had gone there straight from Normal School frightened at the prospect of a plunge into the unknown. She had missed Sèvres, too; often she had longed for the small bedrooms, crowded so close that at night a sleeping neighbor's breath was audible through the walls, and for the house, which had seemed to protect her timidity, to shelter it from life.

She saw herself again arriving at the little Cévenol town, brushing shoulders with peasants, her ears ringing with their crude country accent. She saw the little station with its whitewashed walls, heard the plaintive mooing of calves dragged up to a cattle-van and the clucking of chickens in cages piled up on the platform.

Her Principal had come to meet her; Marie's pale face had suddenly broken into a smile at the sight of this great tall generously built woman, direct and resolute, fair and gay as a canoness. She felt she was

saved since she understood at the outset that she would be directed and upheld.

The discipline which she had liked at Normal School closed in upon her once more in the old seignorial mansion, for the Principal allowed newcomers to take temporary residence in the building itself. Marie Pascal once more obeyed the summons of a bell that bade her rise in the morning, and in the evening ordered her to return to her room while the boarders filed up to the dormitory. Once more she sat down at meals in the refectory and timed her sleep to the curfew.

How shy these first pupils of hers had made her! Exuberance and hardihood were theirs; their pungent words shocked her gentleness. Effaced and almost stammering before them, she was quite without prestige. They would certainly have ragged her but for the support she received from Mademoiselle Roquevaire who, believing that Marie's was a poor, modest and conscientious nature, protected her out of kindness. Her pupils were not numerous; indeed, had Marie been less scrupulous, she might well have raised her head, emerged from her books and thrived

in the wintry sunshine. But her timidity extended to her teaching; she was terrified at her ignorance beside so much vain knowledge.

She was amazed at the benevolent hazards which had allowed her to pass the examination for her teacher's certificate. The dark bold eyes of these tall, seventeen-year-old girls, all of whom she knew to be tormented by their youth, proved more disconcerting than had the benevolence of the examiners. She did not know how to interest them; often she would gaze at them in desperation as they sat nonchalantly over their books, holding a pocket-mirror under their desks or staring dreamily at a branch of evergreen laurel in the garden. Nothing moved them except love poems. They would question Marie about these and, highly embarrassed, she never quite knew what she was permitted to tell them, whether Lamartine's idyll with Madame Charles were a part of the curriculum or whether she might evoke Juliette Drouet to explain Hugo's *Tristesse d'Olympio.* Their instable curiosity soon vanished as their questions remained unanswered. The beautiful tall girls withdrew into an apparent torpor that covered a passionate self-question-

ing, like those flat landscapes whose monotonous reaches of limestone conceal the violence of underground streams. . . .

. . . Spring passed with the sudden rockets of its almond trees and its abrupt spells of heat; the fire of summer blazed about Marie. A summer of compact, crackled gold, through which she felt quite altered, her head heavy, her back broken. Like the tall dark girls, the savor of whose health rose to her nostrils, she too sat beside slumbering texts, very black on the white paper; so overwhelming was the strange torpor that had fallen upon her that she too was left utterly unmoved by a single word in them.

Then, everything that Marie had seen, without understanding, in the wide eyes of Anaïs Pégomas and of Mireille Sérano, suddenly became clear. Overnight, a kinship bound her to these girls, for, young as they were, they were a prey to the same disturbance which was invading her belatedly in her twenty-fourth year, and whose exhausting obsession she was even now discovering.

June came to an end. The nine pupils sat by their youthful teacher. Marie's musical voice rose through

the silence, as she read poems which at last struck an echo in their hearts. The sun, filtering in through the slits of the shutters, shingled the half-darkness. The chirruping of cicada had become so habitual that it was but one more vibration penetrating with the vibrations of light. The handsome girls listened; Marie had ceased to be the tall, pallid, meek, elder sister whom they had scorned. She re-entered invisibly into their magic circle. She too bore that parched impatience. She too aspired, with all her youth, to that unknown which none of them, perhaps, visioned in its precise features. She too was waiting, palpitant. . . .

"I shall not come back next year," Marie told the Principal. "I asked for a post somewhere near my grandparents' home. They wrote to me that there would be a vacancy at Amiens."

But the War had cancelled all appointments and Marie returned to dwell in the school-buildings which were now turned into a military hospital. She had taken up nursing; she had learned to know pain and weariness; she had burned with that feverish ardor to succor, which surmounts disgust and the first recoil of modesty before the unknown, alien flesh of men. A

winter passed amid sunlight, white blouses and white headdresses, tasks practically befitting a Sister of Charity; a winter that had put confusion to flight, brought relief in service given and respite in fatigue.

Then spring had come.

As though she were guilty of an indignity, she had blamed herself for taking part in this sudden radiance, of lingering belated in the garden before returning to her cell, of loving to mingle with the night in the depths of deserted walks.

The song of the frogs rose towards her from the whole dark countryside. A starry sky shone white through the foliage. She forgot the rectangular windows of the rooms of pain. A sort of lassitude broke over her; her knees trembled. Was she so weary because for the last six months she had gone to the outskirts of the town every day, taught her classes perfunctorily and hastened back to the ward to look after her patients? Had the double duty worn her out? Yet she felt she had never been fitter: her lean body was like some supple, resistant metal.

As Marie crossed the garden on the way to her room, she noticed that Mademoiselle Roquevaire's

window was dark; her light was out. Marie was about to go up the broad, shadowy stairway to the top floor, which alone still belonged to the school; she had already laid her hand on the old wrought-iron banister.

Then, it was, for the first time, a shadow glided out of the shadow. She recognized the man without seeing him, and, in a flash, she understood that for weeks now she had been awaiting him, ever since she had first bound his wounded arm, ever since she had first felt his imperious glance upon her. Nervous hands seized her. She was terrified that his wound might break open again. Servitude, the impossibility of flight, of struggle, of hesitation, even, weighed heavily upon her. It was thus the thing happened.

The thing was. A thousand times Marie believed she had forgotten the inconstant memory. Yet across a period of twelve years it came to life again: the tall, manful figure rose before her eyes, she smelled the odor of his masculinity, which, at the outset so surprised her.

Marie quickened her step as she crossed the ruts in the road. Her foot slipped; she splashed into a

puddle that shone on the ground like fallen light. In vain the village shepherdess greeted Marie as she passed. Her old familiar voice could not put the phantom to flight.

Marie Pascal climbed the hill. Its rows of pines, cutting off the horizon, lent it the air of some landscape of the Vosges, a parcel of some distant land transported into this countryside. In the centre of the light triangle etched by the ravine, Marie perceived the small crosses of the Army Cemetery, established here rather than on the plain, where it might interfere with the fine productive tillage.

Could he lie there, the eternal absent, the man upon whom silence had closed in ever since his discharge from hospital? Had he abandoned her or was he dead? All she knew was that her letters to him had been returned to her bearing the legend *Missing*. Could chance have permitted the existence of a mysterious link between herself who walked there and something rotting underground, mingled again with the earth?

Annette! Annette! The frail, light child returned to vie with the obsession of which Marie had so often

believed herself rid, to struggle against the obsession which still overwhelmed her. Annette studying her lesson, her head bent a whit to the left, one lock falling over her right cheek and, over the left cheek, another, hanging like a broken wing. . . . Annette's candid eyes delivering her from the vague shame that always lingered deep in her heart, as though she had transgressed her most profound exactions by yielding, years ago, to the obscure force which, even in her passion, had made her the slave, almost the victim of a stranger's will. But how different this woman seemed across the years, how difficult to identify with the woman Marie had become, who looked out at the pure mild evening and at the sky, roseate as a child's cheek and, away to the west, shining through flowery trees, nacreous for a moment with rosy reflections.

XXIII

WHEN she returned home, Marie found a letter waiting for her on the table. Her name, on the mauve

envelope, in the child's finest copperplate writing. Marie blushed. Afraid to read it in the presence of the old couple, she laid it on one corner of the sideboard and, during the meal, savored the joy of anticipation. In her room, she tried to prolong it by making her preparations for the night as lengthy as possible. Finally she could bear it no longer. Cautiously, she opened the envelope with the tip of her silver paper-cutter, a gift from her pupils.

At first her impatient glance covered the regular lines without understanding anything in them. She read:

Dear Mademoiselle,

Here I am without you, which means to say very much alone. I am trying to do all the work you gave us. I read the books that I could get bought for me on the list you gave us. I hope to learn and to become a better pupil for your sake. I would like to know if you are having a good rest after the hard work of the year. It has stopped raining and I am very glad because now you can go for walks. I ought to wish that the holidays were long so that you could have a

good rest but I am longing for them to end so that I can see you again. Your loving little pupil,

Annette

Marie isolated the words "*loving*" and then "*which means to say very much alone.*" Probably all the rest was there solely for the sake of these two confessions; the first phrase had found vent in the very first line, because it was especially a sense of loneliness that the child felt. Then Annette had controlled herself and decided to write an ordinary, reasonable letter. In the end, however, the fetters of convention had weakened once more. The "*loving*" had spurted forth in a less studied handwriting, and the name had been signed with heavy, determined strokes, as though to attest the truth of her declaration.

XXIV

MARIE vowed to herself that she would not answer, yet, no later than the morrow, her will was giv-

ing way. She had worn down its resistance in the course of a walk during which she had repeated the words of the childish letter as she looked at the magical beauty of the espaliers on the thresholds of farms. The luminous flaky blossoms grappled the old walls. On the apple trees, the light seemed to have gathered into petals, and, in the orchard, the cherry trees made vast white gestures which foamed against the blue sky.

A paschal mildness, gentle as childhood, spread over the world. Everything took on an air of purity and Annette was all that whiteness that rose over the dark earth, nacreous with sunlight, as though mottled by its imperceptible balancing in the air.

Marie imagined the little girl watching for the postman. Should she inflict the disappointment of her silence twice a day upon the child? Should she for the second time suffer the exaltation of a sentiment to become exasperated by depriving it of certitude? Should she abandon this heart to the perilous powers of suspense—suspense, possibly the strongest ally of passion? Surely it was Marie's duty to reply in any case, since she must do so to curb Annette's love. She told herself this so as to furnish her own desire with

some reason which might partake of renunciation.

But all the time Marie was forgetting that this solitude, these schemes to prevent Annette from becoming too deeply impregnated with herself, and the very pleading of her conscience, simply strengthened her own love.

When she reached home, she had decided to reply. To begin with, she wrote to the little cripple, Madeleine Legendre, who had sent her a postal card from the village she lived in; then to the boyish Coutenier, who had asked her for information about a certain examination. For Marie wished her communication to Annette to be one of several similar acts, so that it should not look like a unique gift. But when she found herself face to face with the blank square of paper which was to bring the child her soul, she was afraid. What words could she find to voice her tenderness without actually mentioning it, much in the same secret fashion that Annette, with her unformed writing and her childish sentences, had used instinctively?

For a long time she sat there, her pale face bent over the table. But she did not write. The vast calm of

the fields fell slowly about the sleeping village. The old wall of the shed shone in the moonlight and seemed to hug the white burden of the pear trees against it. A heavy odor of dampness blew into the room, and, before its breath, Marie was amazed to feel her heart swelling with all the confusion of a young girl. Far away, a nightingale tried a hesitant trill; that voice through the night frightened her, as though it had emanated from her, as though it were her own voice.

A horrible idea, which had never before occurred to her, suddenly tortured her soul. Was not her love for Annette the derivative of a more secret need?

Anxiously she wondered whether she were still accessible to everything that torments and exalts. So many years of a gray, torpid life did not set her mind at rest. She felt uncertain and poorly defended; with extreme aversion she asked herself what manner of woman she really was.

She went down into the garden and walked around the rustic beds where her old grandfather raised flowers and vegetables in a naïf comradeship. Was

she still dreaming of happiness? Was there some unknown part of her that still desired everything which had once left her bruised and humiliated? Marie no longer knew what she might bring to the child; she could not tell whether she would not herself prove as insecure as the childish mother who had failed Annette in her quest for undivided love. What security could Marie offer Annette's tyrannic heart?

Marie never asked herself what security the child might offer her. She possessed the marvellous humility of those who love. She moved across the spring air, went back into her room, closed the window, undressed. . . .

She would leave for Paris on the morrow.

XXV

SOMETIMES during the holidays she came up to town to spend the day. Occasionally, even, in the early days of her stay at Amiens, she had fled to Paris to

escape from the dismal melancholy of Sundays in the provinces. From her student days, she had retained a vague familiarity with the town. Yet she always left in the morning and returned the same night, desirous of avoiding a strange hotel and everything calculated to frighten a nature which required the protection of familiar things. For Marie suffered from the void of rooms she did not know; and wallpaper of a color she was unaccustomed to became a motive of distress.

Of Paris, she loved only places she had visited as a girl: the University district, the Museums, theatres where she had liked a play, Concert Halls where she had known the dangerous, utterly insatiable intoxication of music.

This time Marie came up to recapture her former reactions as a test which might furnish her with information about herself. She felt a need of temptation.

Once again, she surrendered to it as she sat in the depths of the amphitheatre, frail and shrinking, between two professionals who sternly followed the

notes on their scores. Marie, ignorant of music, simply followed the emotion that came to birth at the first sonorities. It invaded her, peopling her with different dreams according to the color of the sounds, and suddenly casting her into a nostalgia which she recognized as intact through the years. She seemed to have recovered her youth: she was living those days when, escaping from Sèvres, she indulged in the same rapture, almost tottered as she came out, then, as though answering a call, walked briskly along the Quais to lose herself in the misty city.

The witchcraft of these sounds was potent still. They buoyed her with hope. Why should there not be other possibilities in store for her? All the dreams of her youth seized her again. Meek and already won over, she struggled against the ancient lies; and, as though their moving bows tirelessly pierced holes into reality, the violins projected her towards the supernatural regions of happiness. She, so sedentary, called for other horizons. The world hollowed itself out. An intoxication of departure seethed within her. Flight and suspense. Like those which a new love brings alternately to our hearts. . . .

XXVI

THE scruples which had made her welcome this test were to go on torturing her during the rest of the holidays. Returning to her native village and faced with the letter she had begun, she did not feel she had the right to finish it.

"*My dear child,*"—the customary formula was written, and no more. Her letters to Madeleine Legendre and to Alice Coutenier still lay on the table; Marie tore them up and took refuge in silence. Annette would wait five days more before she saw her again. And, no later than the next day, Marie again reckoned the probable hours when the postman passed. The child's disappointment hurt her.

The hours she lived so meanly beside the old couple weighed on her heart like a physical discomfort. Partaking in this peasant conversation, Marie was a stranger among her own people; she cherished them solely because they were mingled with all her mem-

ories and because their help had permitted her to become herself. A vast ennui possessed her.

The taciturn old man, lost in an easeful torpor, smoked incessantly. At present his rough tenderness, which had once comforted her, seemed utterly barren. Marie's bustling, talkative grandmother constantly offended her. Marie went so far as to long for the solitude of Amiens, where nothing wounded her, where neither voice nor presence intruded between her and herself. For it was there that she could best feel her heart.

XXVII

SHE found Annette again the moment she opened the door of her abandoned lodgings. It had been distance or possibly the presence of strangers that made Marie lose her. She told herself that the inactivity of country life had not benefited her; and she smiled as she thought how quickly she had forgotten her temptations. It was as though her mind had been a prey to a

sort of malady and her soul shaken loose from its true bonds.

She tidied up, dusted, went out to fetch provisions, opened her books again and was angry with herself for having spent the last fortnight in what amounted to a fictitious drama.

Now she need but wait: every day would bring back joy to her. The whole thing was so simple, simple. . . . What was it she had wilfully complicated from a distance? Tomorrow Annette would be there—not before afternoon since Marie did not meet her section in the morning. Tomorrow Annette would be sitting in the second seat on the right of the second row. The light, coming in at the window, fell upon her from the left; and, since Annette always inclined her head a whit to that side as she wrote, she looked as though she were offering her face to the radiance of day.

These interminable holidays had lasted seventeen days. Doubtless in seventeen days Annette had developed. As after Christmas, she would return somewhat modified yet still herself. Marie would recover all that she had recovered then with such delight; three and a

half months of intimacy would be granted them. Somehow she could not believe these would ever come to an end. Nothing qualified the joy of her expectation.

Tomorrow! No later than tomorrow! The hours sped on with dancing feet. Marie forgot to look out at the square, where, under a light rain, the chestnut trees darted forth the stiff tapers of coming flowers. Marie felt no need of space; she settled back in the tiny rooms that held so many pictures of Annette and, repeating the game which had brightened so many winter Sundays, she conjured up the little presence and conversed with her.

Downstairs, the tailor closed the shutters of his shop; it was almost night. Even more gratefully, Marie welcomed the falling shadows, the day's end, the promise of the morrow. . . .

Each would smile at the other from afar; a smile not framed by the lips, but only in the glance. "I am very lonely," Annette had written. Very well, her loneliness would cease. Once again Marie would communicate her soul to the child. Does not the voice permit the most absolute of gifts? Are there not glances more touching than the arms that actually

rock a child? What of that abstract felicity which the satisfied neglect but from which those forced to observe injunctions gather such violent joy? Marie would once again possess all these to the full.

That night Marie wavered between slumber and dream. The rain dripped down along the roof. At daybreak, the drops ceased. A cock crew in the hotel garden nearby. When Marie opened her window on to the square, where the rainwashed foliage glittered under the easterly sun, it was to greet a perfect day. She too felt bathed and refreshed by the dawn. Only a few more hours of waiting; and not only of waiting, since she would find action in walking to school, in following the old, familiar road, in renewing acquaintance with walls and doors and objects that had been the silent witnesses of her life. In her impatience, she anticipated reality. Long before she had finished dressing, she was out in the street; she was resuming contact with her class before she had even left her house. Her every action that morning seemed to be set one hour in advance, it was as though accomplished by anticipation. Even when faced with her other pupils of the Seventh Grade, those of Section

B, Marie was but feebly conscious of their presence. She barely apprehended Solange, rosy as a flowering peach tree, shining as the fairest blossom of the orchard; the two well-behaved little girls in their light smocks looked as round as two small apple trees; and all the rows of young faces were the downy freshness of espaliers. Spring, O human spring! It surrounded her on all sides, just as Nature's spring had surrounded her in the country. But in all the eyes, she saw only the image of Annette, imposing itself upon her as it had incessantly done, everywhere. And it bore the clean fragrance of fresh linen, it spoke in a voice redolent of childhood.

In this section, little Luce Ardouin, with her arsenals of medals and her neatly braided hair, occupied Annette's seat. She had a roguish face, that looked like a small red apple hollowed with dimples; neither the precepts of a pious education nor the discipline of maternal tyranny had been able to alter her natural expression. But, charming as Luce was, Marie constantly superimposed the image of Annette, with her wistful visage and the heavy commas of her black hair. And above these small souls, fretting and fidgetting

under the still intoxicant influence of their recent liberty, Marie addressed all her words to the absent child.

A week, perhaps two, would be required to quell their turbulence. But Marie was not concerned with that, now that she was freed from her usual worries. Discipline and method held no terrors for her. She found herself dictating with zest, being amused at their spelling mistakes; and she was calling them to order with such a smile that the small delinquents smiled back at her.

"How jolly she is this morning," little Luce Ardouin said as she went out.

"Yes. But what's the matter with her?" beautiful Solange mused, as she watched Marie moving off down the corridor.

An interval of one hour separated Marie's two classes. Usually she spent it in the Teachers' Room, preparing the next lesson. But today she did not deign to work. Instead, she drew up to the window. A tall girl sat there, biting deep into a breakfast-roll. Marie was greatly astonished to see so young a person in this room, to which only her colleagues were ad-

mitted; as the stranger greeted her, she was emboldened to ask her name.

"I'm substituting for Mademoiselle Lambert."

Marie had not known that Mademoiselle Lambert was ill.

"No, no. She's gone to England to work on her thesis. I'm taking her place till the end of the year."

The girl had finished her roll; she donned her raincoat, again buried her bobbed hair under her shiny hat, and bowed to Marie. Marie listened to her firm steps echoing down the corridor. An unaccustomed sound, different from those she heard in this monastic house. She smiled at her noisy step, murmured: "How young she is!" and smiled again at the idea of youth.

At noon she was too impatient to eat. Her throbbing heart still urged her to anticipate every action she was to perform. So she went out earlier than usual, so early, indeed, that she did not dare return to the closed school, preferring to wear away her impatience in the street under the young, grain-like leaves of the lindens. The sunshine speckled the

avenue with dancing blobs; she walked amid splashes of light.

Perhaps beyond that block of houses, in the Rue des Trois-Cailloux, near the square, Annette was alighting from the tramway. Already gay groups of children were coming up the road.

Marie moved off towards school past the gate and towards the square, on the alert for the small silhouette in the black-and-white checked coat. Children kept arriving, but Annette was not among them. Marie retraced her steps. Far down the street she saw the lindens of the avenue disappear, and beyond, suddenly, the little dancing form. But was it truly Annette? A woman walked beside her, a tall rather stout woman, very smartly dressed. From a distance, Marie saw only her dazzling freshness and strength. Before she found time to formulate any definite thought, Marie felt her heart contract as at the approach of pain. She experienced suffering before she understood why she was suffering; she almost gave way under a feeling of panic, which held her spellbound, stock still, ready to turn and flee.

For it was indeed Annette beside the stranger. At the door of the school, the child pressed against her; the woman bent over her for a moment, then walked off towards the sunny, leafy gap of the boulevard.

With a heart-rending eagerness, Marie's eyes followed the brightly clad form, the fine somewhat soft gait of that superbly vital woman who was Annette's mother.

Marie felt herself so violently dispossessed that for a few moments she stood motionless. Never had she so suddenly realized her inconspicuousness, her fading youth, her lack of beauty. In a shop window nearby, she caught the reflection of her thin, shabby figure and her wan face. Annette had gone in without seeing her; Marie was tempted to walk back as far as the boulevard and follow the woman, who moved off with happy step under the trees.

The long red-and-white school building, the pupils entering, and the dark file of boarders, from the private school close by, advancing toward her in their navy-blue uniforms, recalled Marie to order. She belonged to a rule. Not hers the leisure to interrogate her heart.

But an indistinct, grievous discomfort accompanied her first to the Teachers' Room, then along the corridors. As she opened the classroom door, she felt herself trembling. The little girls had already been quieted by the usher, who was calling the roll. They were waiting in silence; when she entered, all rose to their feet as one, as a token of respect. Her glance swept on them, ran to Annette. The pallor of the little face and the deep rings under her eyes almost drew a cry from Marie. But her whole countenance, gaunt with waiting, grew suddenly luminous; and Marie was blind to everything save the immensity of her happiness.

XXVIII

"DON'T you think the little Rieu girl has changed a great deal?" Mademoiselle Hatsfeld asked Marie, as she accompanied her to the door of her classroom. Marie gave a start. For the last three days, she had been gnawed by regret at the sight of Annette's drawn

face and her haggard eyes. Twenty times she had been about to rush to the child and ask: "Annette, what ever has happened? Am I to blame for this disaster?" But she had not dared to do it, either in class, or in the corridor, where she was surprised to find herself slowing up to allow Annette to join her, or even out of doors, under the new branches against the flowery square.

"It's natural, I suppose," Marie explained. "A growing child, you know." Her voice sounded odious, hypocritical to her ear. Mademoiselle Hatsfeld, who was aware of everything that happened in Amiens, added:

"I think perhaps her mother upsets her. Madame Rieu is far from blameless. They say that while the father was still alive, she was on very good terms with the directory of the company. Monsieur Rieu was an engineer. Now there's gossip of a *liaison.* At that age, children understand—and suffer!"

Mademoiselle Hatsfeld moved off down the corridor, her tall, thin frame stooping forward. Marie, taken aback, entered the classroom. The girls stood up in line beside their desks, huddled together like

little birds. Their brisk heads leaned forward, turned, pecked at space. The last lingering rumor died down into a silence.

Marie sat down, stared at the blue sky through the window. The fear which had tortured her for the last three days was slowly melting. She was not to blame for the pallor of Annette's face, for the circles under her eyes, for her wrists, too thin against the red, childish hands. Then, suddenly, she was filled with revolt against the woman who was making the child—her child—suffer.

The light smocks stood in orderly alignment beside the desks. Here and there a head or two still moved. Then the immobility of awaiting.

Marie had not made up her mind to begin. The book, laid there by friendly, solicitous hands, remained open at the desired page. Through a haze, Marie saw an oldish man, officious and consequential, standing beside the radiant woman. She saw the child, aloof, the child who, packed off to bed early, never goes to sleep, but stares up at the ceiling, wide-eyed, breathless at the mysterious lives of adults, obscurely jealous, and, more obscurely still, indignant.

Marie could see—but why had the girls begun to shake their heads again, to whisper, to show surprise at her silence?

Suddenly Marie lifted her face. She drank in the blue square of sky, the summer, happiness; everything within her rose, leaped with joy, and, without expressing it in words, clamored the truth that suddenly burst over her.

"Her mother will consider her a burden. She will not have a mother!"

And a vast hope that suppressed every obstacle of reality:

"I shall have her all to myself!"

XXIX

DURING the hours when Marie did not work, a world of plans filled her mind. She restored her village home, removed the partitions, pierced a large window through on the garden, draped a new room with light, cheerful material. It was imperative that

Annette take pleasure in the house of her childhood. Annette must live where Marie had lived so that later, they might say "our house"; Annette must touch earth by the same roots as Marie, so that the same relatives and the same surroundings might prove a common bond between them.

Annette would no doubt love the old grandfather in spite of his rustic ways. But could the dry, harsh grandmother win the child's favor? To her old grudges, Marie added another, non-existent, yet very real to her heart: a possible misunderstanding with the child.

In her own home, too, Marie wondered by what ingenious devices she might enlarge the space, so stingily allotted, of her three rooms. Or might it not perhaps prove more pleasurable to live at close quarters, directly under the shelter of the walls, under the same soft light, breath to breath, one sleep watching over the other?

And later, when Annette was older, when she required solitude and dreams, Marie would seek another lodging.

But fervently she prayed that this halt on the fron-

tiers of half-childhood might last a long time. She banished all thought of the future, warded off all threats. Fleeting though she knew the period of a mother's omnipotence was, Marie dreamed it eternal.

XXX

WHAT is good? What is evil? . . .

Marie was smiling. The tall young woman she had first seen a fortnight before, in the Teachers' Room, biting into her roll with the fine appetite of youth, had come to pay her a visit.

"How severe duty must be here in this little town! But when you've travelled about in the world!"

The nomad's sweeping glance defied narrow authority; Marie found herself secretly attracted by the other's daring.

Her strong, somewhat virile hands made a gesture which described horizons; the names of the far-away places fell from the violently rouged lips.

"You're all suffocating here! I felt it when I first came. Most of the women are too used to their prison to dream of escaping! But you're different. You're still too young for that."

Marie shook her head. Youth was no longer hers, at least not in the sense in which the other understood it. In direct contradiction to her colleague, she felt that she needed this pause and the more secret need of continuing herself in a child.

"Do you mean to say that you've been here nine years," the girl went on, "and that you've never dreamed of new horizons? It's extraordinary. After all, you don't look half-dead. How can you be content with that square, bound by a town . . . with those moldy trees . . . those trimly ordered beds . . . and those idiotic ornamental plants, growing out of the rotten trunk of that dead tree?"

She was right. Under Marie's balcony, the town gardener had made the most unexpected leaves and creepers spring from out of hollow bark. But Marie never noticed this nowadays. She had ceased to be shocked by anything that might surprise the wan-

derer; it was as though the cramped world, through which she barely moved, had melted, worn down to shreds by her perpetual presence.

They spoke on, a little, about the town, about its avenues, some of which were not unlike the tranquil avenues of Versailles. Then they discussed the watery, fresh country where, between the meanders of the river, the vegetable gardens grew green. Finally they came to the Cathedral, its powerful and melancholy exterior, its air of solitude on the parvis, and its interior, that gave the funereal impression of too great a monument whose shadow gnaws its very height.

For the first time, they agreed. Since girlhood, Marie had been frightened at this enormous house of God. Her childish piety had become a mortal terror in this crypt-like penumbra, and, since her return, she had avoided this sepulchre of shadows. She would never have dared confess this secret aversion to others. But the stranger's determined glance seemed bent on probing the very corners of Marie's heart; Dominique Allary uttered her opinions so boldly merely to surprise Marie's confidences, and doubtless forced her own reserve in order the better to abuse other peo-

ple's. Marie, gentle and artless, offered no resistance. For her modesty was mere passivity; she belonged to the violent.

Now Dominique Allary took up their colleagues, and the faces which Marie had seen uncomprehendingly for nine years suddenly appeared under a brilliant light. On human souls, the wanderer turned the same gift of rapid investigation that she brought to her discovery of the world. A traveller's habit, that haste to extract everything from people before taking to flight. It was Marie who grew astonished and murmured: "Do you really think so?" with naïve surprise.

She had never plunged so deep into hearts unknown, apparently dead, closed. She had never noticed that an almost jealous anxiety forced one of her senior colleagues to vie with her old husband. She was quite unaware that the Music mistress, devoured by maternal ambition, made the lives of her three daughters a musical inferno. She had never suspected the profound attachment which bound two of her colleagues, who, though always together, were so distant in appearance that one might have imagined

them to be united by some ineluctable compulsion. And she found it difficult to believe that the radiance, which sometimes appeared on her sallow, ungrateful countenance, betokened the rapture of Mademoiselle Weil-Lévy's gift to God.

She knew, however, that she lived in the heart of town, buried in a Dominican convent which took on a few lady boarders in order to make both ends meet. Marie had crossed the outer cloister, passed through the enormous parlor, climbed the stairs of light wood that led to those two little rooms where her colleague lived under the eaves between a post office clerk and a private nurse. But she would never have dreamed she had chosen this domicile except for reasons of economy or for the sake of serenity and peace.

"Mademoiselle Weil-Lévy!" she repeated in amazement.

"What's a Jewish name got to do with it? She's baptized a Roman Catholic, baptized and submitted to the rule. Practically a nun among you. It's lucky she teaches Math. Otherwise there'd be a nice row with the authorities."

"A row. Why?"

"What about non-denominational schools?"

Marie had never vouchsafed it a thought. For her part, her very soul practised the required neutrality without trouble. She had never felt it necessary to give a final precept to the little souls she was guiding into life. Her admirations sufficed. Corneille was her bread. As though realizing it for the first time:

"Everyone is a Roman Catholic here," she said.

"Excess is a matter of scandal even in questions of faith."

"Who among us does anything to excess?" Marie asked.

"All of you, perhaps."

"Oh come, now, a moment ago you were speaking of our slow, dull lives."

"Oh but mummies have passions! The narrower the circle and the more restricted the life, the greater the obsession."

The phrase surprised Marie; she looked at her companion, questioning.

"Everything which, for want of something better,

assumes a burning importance. Vanity, jealousy, pedantry, even that selfishness into which existences without issue in other existences lead us."

"We have the children."

Marie had uttered her cry of protest and regretted it immediately after. The stranger's lucid glance seemed to pierce her through and through. For a moment, without exchange of words, she felt she was being read like an open book. She was so hopelessly at a loss that Dominique Allary took pity on her and:

"You may well talk of them!" she said, with a pretence of jesting. "A lot of good they are! For the short time we have the mites, and the doubtful result of any attachment we might have. . . ."

But Marie realized that she spoke thus only to hide the discovery she had made. And, against her will, Marie cast a swift glance about her to find out whether the Class photograph, in which she appeared beside Annette, were clearly visible from the chair where the traveller sat on, without vouchsafing the least indication of departure.

XXXI

In obedience to Annette's mute entreaty, and determined for the last fortnight to do whatever possible to console the pale, grieving child, Marie had consented to pose with her class when the school photographer made his annual visit.

Thus all her reserve had gradually broken down. Her chief aim was to prevent Annette from suffering; she must rekindle the flame in the lifeless eyes, fill out the hollow cheeks and restore something childish that was escaping from the gaunt body, from the gentle measured gestures that had learned to be silent, to listen to her own suffering.

"Does Annette love me enough," Marie now asked herself, "to forget the rest of it?"

Every morning she wondered what new discovery the child might have made in the realm of pain. On days when the little face seemed more cheerful, Marie was filled with hope. Surely the child had sur-

mounted her bitterness; her anguish, gradually worn down by certitude, had at last vanished; she was turning away from her neglectful mother; something else was occupying her; she was on the point of returning to Marie whole?

But a single vague, distracted glance out of the window plunged Marie into confusion.

What was Annette thinking when she looked up without seeing? What mystery lurked in her head, as she raised it a whit toward the light, or bowed it over an open book? Even during class, her invisible rival took Annette from Marie, during the only hours when the child had belonged wholly to her.

"You're a trifle pale, Annette. Do you feel quite well? Do you eat enough?"

Now she questioned her whenever they met in the corridor. She chose her to run all errands. At four o'clock, she invariably passed in front of the lamppost where the child was waiting.

The child, bashful, answered in brief phrases. Her clumsy words spoke only of schoolgirl concerns. No, she had not yet begun to write her next French composition; she had an "Arith." problem to work out.

Annette said "Arith." like all the little schoolgirls. Marie was somewhat surprised to hear her speaking unlike an adult, without the least trace of the intuition and discoveries that livened her essays. Marie never suspected how bashful, how overcome with joy and how abashed at her ignorance, Annette felt in the presence of the teacher, haloed with knowledge. So both spoke amid a double embarrassment: Marie baffled at finding a small awkward girl instead of the exceptional being she had dreamed of, Annette annihilated by her emotions.

After the child had gone home, Marie would retrace her steps past the lamp-post, which was the place of their brief meeting, and draw up a mental inventory of their brief dialogue, weighing the poor faltering words spoken to her, studying their sense, trying to divine in them all that remained unsaid. Then she would return home, and, in her imagination, follow Annette into the distant suburb where she lived, and enter her unknown house.

"Now she is doing her home work! Now she is learning her lessons. She is forgetting. . . ."

Mealtime began her anguish. Was it not then that

Annette met her mother again? Did her mother dine alone with her?

She was annoyed at not knowing, and, through her ignorance, at being unable to share such torments as touched the child.

At night Annette went back to her room. Was it only then that she suffered? Did she divine an alien presence in the house or did everything happen outside? Had the child learned through a mere chance, a conversation overheard, or the gossip of some servant? And what exactly did she know?

Even more anxiously, Marie wondered what that knowledge might awaken in her. How much knowledge of life entered into her ignorance? What thoughts, what pictures arose behind the childish brow, the fringe of black hair? Annette's innocence was being spoiled for Marie; they were destroying Annette's purity. A bitter rancor revolted her. Appalled at such a disaster, she also wondered: "Does the child suffer from that evil, too?"

XXXII

"Is my predilection for Annette obvious?" Marie wondered as she recalled her visitor's piercing glance. As usual, she crossed the vestibule, paved with flagstones, and emerged into the perpetually draughty court. The bell had not yet rung for recess, but her impatience always brought Marie there early. She paused a moment to listen to the familiar sounds that greeted her the moment she entered: the monotonous, chanting voices of the tiny tots spelling; the aerial songs floating down from the music room on the third floor; the sonorous vibrations that issued from Mademoiselle Hatsfeld as she articulated German texts. Then, other voices, fainter and less distinct, discernible only when raised to a high pitch in question or when sharp tones of reproof cut the air; and, still further below these sounds, a low murmuring that indicated hesitation on the part of pupils reciting their lessons or an effort to frame a reply that was slow in coming. Occasionally a scraping of chairs.

The rap of rulers on desks. All those vague rumors that make up the silence of a classroom.

"Does my expression betray my predilection for Annette? Or was it only my words which gave me away? How could I be so foolish as to divulge my secret?" Then, after a moment's reflection, her calm returned. "Mademoiselle Allary is here for such a short time. What does it matter if she knows?"

And yet, as Marie entered the Teachers' Room, she looked apprehensively about for Mademoiselle Allary. There was a conventual melancholy about the gloomy room, lined with narrow lockers of dark oak, poorly illumined by a light which trickled in from the court below, through windows buried in the recesses of the wall. At that hour, the room was empty. Pamphlets and professional periodicals littered the table. The chairs, out of place, attested their late occupants' indifference to the setting, and the haste with which the call of a bell drove a woman, resting there, to her feet, and sent her speeding down the corridor to an expectant class.

Marie liked the severity of the room, its air of detachment and austerity. She opened her narrow

locker, laid down her hat, hung up her summer cloak; from her shelf, she took down the books she was to use that day. Then she sought refuge in the recess of one of the windows.

She had to look up to catch sight of the sky, ravaged by heavy clouds and pregnant with storm. "What does it matter if a passerby has learned my secret?" she told herself for the second time. She found comfort in the peace about her. Gently, she opened the windows an inch or two to the heavy air; it bore a savor of sap. Heart-rending odors trailed in from a neighboring garden, through a gap in the buildings, where box trees were in bloom.

Marie took her books, reread the texts she was about to impart to Annette, pictured the small face, the somewhat short nose, the charming oval between the two heavy wings of hair. Which poem would Annette prefer? Marie would read them in class and let the children choose—a devious means of discovering better the child's tastes, of penetrating deeper into this heart which was offered her.

The hour for recess must be near; Marie could hear the Monitresses walking up and down the cor-

ridors. As she rose to her feet, she was surprised to see the fold of a dress protruding beyond the arris of the other window.

A woman stood there, motionless. Marie, who had not heard her either move about or turn the pages of a book, pretended to be looking at the professional periodicals. She circled around the long table until she stood opposite the second window.

Mademoiselle Weil-Lévy seemed to be sleeping. But an intense emotional life illumined her pale face. Her lips opened silently on shapes of words that bore no sound; the rigid body in the long, old-fashioned dress seemed stripped clean of all matter, a mere prop for her splendent countenance.

In a moment the bell would interrupt this dream. Marie edged away, pitying her because she must abandon this ineffable dialogue in order to obey a rule. Shrill cries were already rising from the court, where the small host had been set free and left to scamper about. The enforced attention and silence of an hour's study had produced an abnormal exuberance of gaiety.

"What an exaltation restraint produces!" Marie

mused, as she climbed the stair against a current of descending children.

Her classroom was empty.

Marie enjoyed these minutes of waiting. She would walk slowly up and down in front of the unoccupied desks; sometimes she made so bold as to go down the aisle, pause in front of the second row, caress the child in the second seat on the right. She glanced up at the wall, saw that the leaf had been properly torn off the calendar by a careful hand. May twenty-fifth! . . . Marie gazed out of the wide windows at the stormy sky, alive with thick clouds.

A whole tenebrous wall of sky moved imperceptibly, behind a crystal flock of livid clouds that seemed to rise and fall like great waves, as though twin currents of wind, blowing in contrary directions, at different heights, were shaking the heavens. Beneath the echoes that filled the house, Marie perceived the silence of this weighty gliding. Hearing the sonorous patter of a thick hail, she turned around; her pupils were entering with impatient step.

The classroom invasion always resembled a joyous struggle; Marie never attempted to curb it. She liked

the jolt and jostle which they made to occupy seats which had been allotted them a long time ago; she enjoyed what seemed the swaying dance of an entire ballet that did not know its steps, the brisk, hasty entrance of a flock into the pasture land. Amid this collective movement, Marie always singled out Annette, watched her progress, observed her air of suspense and her desire to appear the quietest and most orderly of the flock. Annette could not take her place before the five girls who sat in her row had passed; as each child went by, she would look up at Marie.

But where was she today?

The little round head, with the two wings of hair that fell over the cheeks, was nowhere in the dance; Marie's eyes looked for her in vain. The children were gliding into the row on the right; when they had all taken their seats, there was a gap. A terrible fright gripped Marie. Without it even occurring to her to hide her anxiety:

"Where is Annette?" she asked.

But, though she thought she had screamed, her

voice was so low that only the first row had caught her words.

"She is absent," Madeleine Legendre answered.

Without considering whether such solicitude might prove suspicious, Marie continued:

"Does anybody know what is the matter with her?"

The little cripple's gesture betokened complete ignorance. The boyish Coutenier made the most of this silence to shout:

"Nobody knows anything about her."

A thin, shrill voice in the third row piped up:

"Please, may I take her place, Mademoiselle?"

It was Angèle Desrousseaux, a pale, slight little girl, a chatterbox and a lover of tattle.

"No," Marie told her.

But the child bore her no grudge:

"I live near where she lives. I can ask after her at noon."

The lesson began; the children recited. Marie deeply troubled, gazed out at the vast sky, as its clouds kept rolling across a background of fluid ink. She realized that she had felt a menace weighing

upon her since morning; now she tried in vain to dominate an almost animal terror of certain peril:

"At that stage of their development," she thought, "children have so many minor ailments. How many of them come back, after a sudden absence, fitter and prettier than before."

A long, slow hour, and the next slower still. By now, Marie had considered every possible danger. She had been tempted twenty times to give the children a written exercise in order the better to absorb herself in her terror. She saw Annette run over. Or she imagined the child walking away towards the vegetable gardens, perhaps already sinking in the stagnant waters. There were so many child-suicides.

"At that age children understand—and suffer." Those were Mademoiselle Hatsfeld's words. Marie recalled every indication of change in Annette, her alarming loss of flesh, her air of absence, sometimes, of utter mystery. The class, sitting before her, seemed to recede, a blurred outline seen through a fog. Like an automat, she read, explained, questioned. A two-fold life governed her mind which at once furnished her class with the necessary explanations and fol-

lowed its own lucid journey through the realms of pain.

Marie was like that sky, over whose everdeepening wall, twin contrary winds chased its flaky clouds in opposite directions.

XXXIII

MARIE might have rushed to Annette's house, but convention offered her shyness a sufficiently powerful obstacle. As soon as she was free to act, restored to a world of streets, tramways and taxis, all of which might have borne her to Annette's side, Marie returned home, hugging the walls, hesitating at street corners, crossing the road circumspectly, walking with that step which inspired Dominique Allary to say: "Mademoiselle Pascal walks like a blind man's dog." She bought her bread, stopped at the butcher's, came back to the shop where they sold vegetables ready-cooked, and, armed with her usual provisions on days when she was in a hurry, made for home.

Today her every action, though completely in accordance with her usual behavior, appeared unreal; she felt as though she were beginning life on a new plane. But these duties helped her to waste time; her sole object was to span the interval between the present moment and that when she could question Annette's neighbor. She consumed her haste by leaving a half-hour too early, walking back and forth, deciding to return to school and waiting under the vault.

"Ill! Annette ill?"

She heard it confusedly and made the child, who was bashful and breathless from running, repeat it.

"They don't know what's the matter. . . . She has a very high fever! Her mother is very worried! So is the doctor!"

Angèle Desrousseaux, encouraged by the message she had brought, asked again to be allowed to sit in Annette's seat. Marie dared not refuse now. But when it was done, she gave a start. That empty space had been easier to bear than this substitution. Angèle Desrousseaux assumed the air of importance children are pleased to adopt when they have won a coveted favor. To Marie she was odious. Marie

avoided casting her glance upon Angèle but her eyes, accustomed to look in that direction, saw the child constantly.

Then it occurred to her that she had condemned Annette to cease to sit there, since, instead of keeping her place, she had given it to another. "Not absent," she said to herself, "but more than absent: disappeared, wiped out from among the living." Superstitions choked her, she longed to drive out the supplanter. And the hours of the afternoon dragged on, as eternal as the wretched hours of the morning. Deep within her, a growing anguish burst out in lightning flashes, even as in the vast, mournful sky the twin breaths had melted into livid shadows, and the storm, breaking out violently, began to beat earth with the stinging lashes of the rain.

XXXIV

MARIE dared not ring. Three times, already, she had walked past over a sidewalk of beaten earth,

soggy with rain. Then, to escape notice, she had moved on and was walking up and down again, a little lower down and across the street.

Night fell in an avalanche of water. Marie gazed across the way into the small house, built, like all suburban houses in the niggardly modern style, with a façade of bricks and pretentious iron rails. On the second floor, a light was suddenly turned on.

The house seemed impenetrable. The county cars rattled by. As she trudged through the mud, Marie felt the warm, drenched air, still heavy with storm.

Should she ring and ask for news? . . . Then—what? What would she do after? The terror of a night to spend, without learning anything further every hour, made her hesitate as much as her fear of intruding. She reserved, as the supreme mouthful of water against her thirst, the moment when she would stand in the hall of the house, when they would speak to her of Annette.

The proprietress came out of the grocery to take in the few bunches of greens and cans that still remained on display under the rain. Stop after stop, the street-cars discharged the masses of men whom the

town yielded to the night. Marie walked down the cross streets, hoping to see the crests of the trees in Annette's garden above the walls of the back yards. Then she continued all the way to the end of the avenue, where it arched over a bridge above the waters of the vegetable gardens, before meeting the main road and disappearing into the dark country. When at last she returned to Annette's house, her head ached with fatigue. Should she ring now?

She was still hesitating, a few steps from the doorway, when the door opened. A wild-eyed servant came out, ran into the grocer's, then crossed the muddy road again. Marie stopped her on the threshold.

"How is the child?"

The thick, bewildered woman repeated the question. Then, at last, she seemed to understand.

"Badly. Very badly indeed."

The Picard accent, and perhaps her confusion, lent her voice a guttural tone. She pushed Marie in front of her.

"Go in, Madame, go in."

The staircase rose ladder-like from the diminutive antechamber. The drawing-room faced the street, il-

lumined with a vague reflection of sky. The servant left Marie in the darkness and walked gravely upstairs.

"Annette!" Marie cried silently. An atrocious bitterness parched her mouth. She sat down; she seemed to be sinking into a pit of darkness. All notion of time vanished.

Voices drew her out of her torpor:

"Never mind; it won't be serious. Children have such surprising reactions. I had the same thing as a lad."

The man's voice was youthful, full, rich with suppressed gaiety.

"Just fever," he continued, "both lungs attacked. People live through that!"

"O God!" cried a voice in anguish.

A sudden blaze of light. Marie stood face to face with the mother. The man, apparently very young, with a determined chin and smooth-shaven cheeks, stood in the background.

"I'm sorry you were left in the dark," Madame Rieu apologized.

"How is Annette?"

"Very ill," the mother replied. Then in a lower voice, as though she feared to name the danger:

"Pneumonia."

"Both lungs?" Marie asked.

"No. They hope not."

The young man drew near. Madame Rieu presented him:

"Monsieur François Hamel."

Almost against her will, Marie was keenly conscious of his thick hair brushed back from the forehead, his long wild lashes, his arrogant youth, and, beside him, the woman, her face haggard and drawn from lack of sleep. For a second, Marie could not tell what feeling stirred so confusedly under her anguish. Was it anger, pity, perhaps attraction? She wished to leave and here she was, staying on.

"Make haste," Madame Rieu told François Hamel. "You *must* find somebody."

"What can I do to help you?" Marie offered.

"Nothing. Nothing. He has gone to fetch a nurse. For the last two days and two nights I have been on my feet. I can't hold out any longer. She was taken ill Wednesday night. Her teeth were chattering; she

had a chill. I thought first it might be the grippe. The doctor only came Thursday."

"What does he say about it?"

"The right lung is attacked. They cupped her, but the fever won't go down. She refuses to drink. She's such a difficult child."

"Oh no she isn't," Marie objected.

"Perhaps not in class. But at home! . . . I scold her, I plead with her, but it's quite useless. Ah, if you knew what children are!"

Marie's love burned within her, flooding her soul. She longed to protest yet she dared not even ask to see Annette.

With the incoherent minuteness of those who witness a mysterious peril and struggle in anguished ignorance against it, the mother entered into a detailed discussion of the symptoms and the attentions required. Her négligé had slipped open over her fair twinkling flesh; Marie breathed in the fragrance emanating from her and noticed that her short hair had been waved quite recently.

"I shall go," Marie told herself, "I *must* go."

It was then that Madame Rieu confessed:

"Who knows if Monsieur Hamel can find a nurse? I am so desperately afraid that I shall not be able to sit up another night. If I were not talking to you now, I feel I would have fallen asleep. I am at the end of my tether."

"Would you like me to wait until you are sure you can get help?" Marie suggested. "You could stretch out for a few moments while I stayed here. It would rest you a little."

Marie was always to remember that first visit of hers, when the enemy lay there, resting under her protection, when her face, relaxed in sleep, reassumed its true age and was virtually a confidence.

The house fell silent about the even, labored breath. Above, far above, the servant's muffled steps in Annette's room. . . . And the patter of the rain.

The last street-car had gone by a long time ago.

Nothing remained now save a solitude, in which Marie sat tense, as though her love could save the child. Love seemed to rise from her like a flame. Within herself she discovered a sort of occult power

that enabled her to emerge out of her own body and to be elsewhere, to rise up against destiny and give combat.

She did not know—perhaps she would never learn —that the extraordinary faculty which keyed her up, as she sat with joined hands and lifted face, was, in the depths of her heart, a power of prayer.

XXXV

SUDDENLY, she thought of her colleague at the Convent of the Holy Blood, of the two little rooms high above the roofs of the town, where Mademoiselle Weil-Lévy lived between a post office clerk and a nurse. The latter might be free. They must go there and find out. She said so to Madame Rieu, who stood by helpless, half-asleep. She repeated it to François Hamel, whose handsome face took on an expression of anxiety. She explained that he need simply drive her there in the small borrowed car that was waiting outside.

Soon the pair were spinning over the deserted street. Of a sudden, out of the depths of her anguish, curious memories rose to Marie's mind. His great hands, flattened out on the steering-wheel, suggested other hands, lost in the past; fine virile hands with long fingers, thin palms, square nails. Distant sensations reawakened in her heart. She knew the misery of being flesh from which mere chance may unexpectedly draw forgotten resonances.

She must save Annette! She diverted her thought, and its troublous corollary, from the white hands in the night. Annette! Once again Marie was wholly a mute supplication.

They were coming into town already. The car bumped over the cobbles. Below, the station crouched deep in its hollow; a long train of signals trailed away on either side. They drove up the street again, passed by the square, over which Marie's windows must have remained wide open. They could see only the bottom of the massive walls of the Cathedral. Then, crossing the parvis, the car swerved aside into a narrow street and drew up before an oak portal.

"What if it is after hours?" Marie wondered. "Will they open the door?"

They did open. Though long after the regular hour of retirement, a nun was still downstairs, putting the final touches to the preparations for an approaching festival. She led Marie through the house.

"Perhaps Mademoiselle Weil-Lévy is asleep," she objected as she was about to knock.

"My business is highly urgent," Marie protested.

But Mademoiselle Weil-Lévy was working. The papers spread out on the table attested a scrupulous classification. She came forward towards Marie at once, as though there were nothing unusual about her tardy visit. Or perhaps human impressions could not find play upon her pale, grave countenance. Marie was grateful to her for listening to her rambling request so calmly.

"The nurse has left," Mademoiselle Weil-Lévy told her. "She's been on a case for a fortnight. I'm afraid you cannot count on her."

"Do you happen to know of anyone in the convent?"

"The nuns never go out. No, there is nobody here. But what about you?"

"What about *me?*" Marie echoed.

"Why not: at least for tonight? Tomorrow something can be arranged. I shall have someone look into it, I promise you. But how upset you look! Is it so terribly serious?"

Marie nodded. She could not speak; she would have burst into tears. She could only stare out at Mademoiselle Weil-Lévy from the depths of her distress. She knew that her colleague was reading her mind, perhaps discovering the most secret springs of her attachment. But as though the other's impassive countenance could witness nothing, Marie knew no fear.

A huge crucifix shone black above the narrow bed. Without a word, Mademoiselle Weil-Lévy made a vague gesture towards it. Perhaps she meant to convey that the destiny of the child depended upon Him or that Marie must have faith in Him amid her anguish.

Marie had regained her self-control. She stiffened, first of all through the power of her will, then tense with a sudden, buoyant joy. *She* would look after Annette, *she* would defend Annette. The possibility of offering her services had not occurred to her; she had

not believed they would accept her aid. Now she was in such a haste that she lost her footing on the narrow, slippery, over-polished stair.

Mademoiselle Weil-Lévy accompanied her to the door of the vast, silent house.

XXXVI

HER impatience seared her like a burn. . . .

The tiny car swallowed up the night. It moved in leaps and bounds over the stony streets; the jolts kept pushing Marie against the young man. Her cheek brushed against the rough material of his coat, against the hard manful shoulder. But nothing could trouble her now: her whole thought, tense to the point of vertigo, went out to the child.

The station squatting in the shadows drew in its weft of rails, dimly visible, and its trail of twinkling lights. Once more the car whizzed over the slippery, viscid streets, and the low houses of the suburbs flashed by. A door at which they stopped, a key open-

ing it with the authority of habit, the little antechamber, the click of a switch and, in the glare of electricity, a woman rising in the doorway of the drawing room:

"Did you bring someone along?"

Marie explained, related their vain efforts, mentioned her nursing experience, cited the diploma she had received during the War. For the second time her knowledge of nursing was speeding her to her destiny. As she evoked the days when she had cared for soldiers, as a guaranty of her competence, her voice awakened no phantom. She had forgotten everything beyond the providential power her past conferred upon her.

She did not find it too difficult to gain her point. In the hour of panic, she bore authority; she was the new force offered at the precise moment when the exhausted energies cry quits.

The shattered woman led her up the narrow, creaking stairway. There was a short halt on the first floor; the light shone on a rumpled bed. Marie looked away. On the second floor, her thumping heart drowned out the sound of an oppressed breathing; she grew aware

of it only when she stood in the half-darkness of the sick-room. At first she could only make out the figure of the drowsy servant. Then, on the great white bed, she caught sight of a black spot. The head, with its dark hair, appeared; but so tiny amid the pillows that Marie did not immediately realize that it was Annette's hair. Dazed, she could but follow the throaty spasms of the child's jerky respiration. Annette's breath came so swift, so choked, and so imperiously, that Marie felt she herself were breathing wholly to its rhythm.

The mother spoke in a low voice. Marie heard nothing save the quick, raucous tones. It was only when she leaned over it that she recognized the little sleeping face, turned toward the wall, hollowing the pillow, and inclined towards her shoulder, as though to hide, to seek the shelter of she knew not what darkness, what silence. . . .

"In a half-hour, we shall have to change the poultice."

Madame Rieu moved close to the night-light to read the doctor's orders; next, she showed Marie the tem-

perature chart and the adjoining dressing-room, where the litter of linens and cotton-wool bore an air of catastrophe. Then she came back to the sick-room:

"You won't need help? If you do, just call me. Or you can knock at that door. The servant sleeps on this floor."

"I can manage," Marie answered, "I won't need help."

Marie listened to the retreating footsteps. The raucous breathing kept coming from the frail ribs as though the little body were a strange instrument of noise.

In spite of her terror, a desperate happiness filled her heart. The child was there, entrusted to her. . . . Marie, it was, who would nurse, struggle, defend. She almost gave thanks for the power of destiny; a strength, similar to that she had felt earlier in the evening, welled up in her. She knew she could protect Annette and save her life.

Marie circled round the bed. The small insensible head disappeared in the hollow of the pillows; the face was lost in the shadows. Marie remembered having fed

a sick bird once; she recalled how it had been so thoroughly drained by illness that it weighed almost nothing in the hollow of her hand.

"My child! My little child!"

The words, uttered so often in the silence of her heart, pierced that heart. Annette's hoarse breathing wrenched her. She knew a moment of weakness; she fell on her knees and pressed her brow against the side of the bed. All her body seemed shaken by this murderous rattle. Suddenly she heard a swift, halting cry. Annette had started up; she was looking at Marie with the light of delirium in her eyes. The little hands, straining forward, clung to her as though the child, feeling herself about to disappear, needed Marie's help. Marie brought her cheek close to Annette's. The raucous breath oppressed her. She made a great effort not to weep; yet, all the while, she was tasting a kind of welcome sweetness. . . .

She had given Annette the proper attentions, taken the wrappings off her narrow chest, her small, thin shoulders, her light flesh burned by the cups. She had felt Annette's panting breath rise and fall under

her hand; she had taken off the warm compress and put on a fresh one, wet with cold water. Over the slight, abandoned body, she had performed the duties of a mother: she had wrapped it up and pinned the long strips of linen, which were former swaddling cloths brought out of the depths of closets. The exhausted child had surrendered her body to Marie's ministering hands.

Marie was silent. Now Annette was asleep, still breathing with the same fast, guttural rattling. Hers was an anguished slumber hovering between nightmare and vigil. Her eyes were not quite shut; thin slits of white enamel gleamed under her eyelashes.

"The infection!" Marie thought as she reeled with terror.

Time floated on, interminable, unreal. At the proper hours she rose, made the docile child drink, administered the potion. Whenever she approached the bed, the little burning hand sought hers in an instinctive need of help, and Marie joyfully suffered the compulsion of immobility as she wept wretchedly over her inability to render further aid.

The tiny dark head sank into the pillow; the body

disappeared, leaving the bedclothes as flat as though she were not there. To Marie it seemed to be melting a little more every minute under the gasping attack of the malady.

She heard steps coming up the stairs. Madame Rieu bent over the precarious slumber of the child, so close to Marie that they seemed linked together by the same love.

"No—not the same!" Marie murmured to herself. And, for a second time, she persuaded the other to go back to sleep. For Madame Rieu was staggering with fatigue, unaccustomed as she was to rigor, with her soft flesh and her loose limbs. A body without sinews, Marie thought, as she considered how devoid she was of womanly softness, how harshly clad with thinness.

"I assure you I need nothing. I promise you I can cope with everything."

And she could; she was well steeled against possible surrender. Her lucidity of mind, amid her distress, was frightening. She looked quite without illusion at Annette's face, discolored and ashen in the first gleams of the dawn. Not once had she hesitated,

when confronted with the complicated attentions she must bring the child. On the contrary, she marked the symptoms with utter accuracy. Instead of trying to gloss over the danger, she did not fear to say: "The kidneys are working badly. This is only an early morning respite. The fever will go up again. If only the heart resists!" More, to the interminable passage of time, she added all that which must go by before the malady accomplished its evolution; she topped her own grief with the harrowing recollection of other like illnesses, and, filled with memories, she leaned over her, studying her short breath in order to gauge the peril better by comparison.

Outside the sparrows were chirruping. A cock crew. Night was at an end, so too the excruciating yet blessed duty of watching over Annette's life. Every advancing second was bringing this desperate felicity to a close. For she knew an hour would come when, remembering her cares, with the sound of that wheezing breath still in her ears, she would say: "Yes, that also was happiness."

Marie would have wished to eternalize her very anguish; and here was dawn, seeping to the window,

restoring their transparence to the cretonne flowers on the drawn curtains, casting a flowery half-light into the room.

"What is it, Annette?"

The child was gazing at her. She was suffering. The pain in her side was growing keener as she emerged from the prostration of the night.

"Will you stay?"

"I have my class to teach, dear."

"But I want you! I want you!"

The wan mouth trembled at the corners, rose in the centre with a childish pout.

"I must go, Annette. You know very well I must. But I shall come back again."

Such servitude seemed atrocious; yet Marie submitted to it. She had not been bowed under the yoke of professional obligations nine years long for nothing. Annette was calm now; she ceased to protest. Instead, she took Marie's hand, laid her burning cheek against it. Marie felt the light pressure, enjoyed the momentary pause to the full. The fatigue of a sleepless night exalted her. Suddenly she knew that the malady would yield, that she would save the child.

The first street-car was speeding off toward town. The servant opened the door of the next room. Marie kissed the burning brow, lowered the sleeping head gently down on the pillow.

XXXVII

As though nothing had occurred, there were the same school, the same noisy groups of children, the same Teachers' Room, plunged in a perpetual half-darkness with the deep embrasures of its windows, where, the day before, Marie had wondered what poem Annette would prefer. That nourishment of the spirit, which she prepared so lovingly each day, was futile now.

She envied the woman who, at this precise moment, was preparing the child's potion, pouring out her brew, wrapping up the angelic body that Marie had felt as she held it last night. Poor suffering body, slashed with scars, spotted with round bruises. . . .

She heard the perfunctory exchange of greeting by

her colleagues, the eternal remarks on the weather, their whole insignificant cordiality; meanwhile she herself seemed to be advancing, invisible, through a closed world, that of her anguish. Not one of those women would have understood.

Dominique Allary, clad in sport clothes, came in. She was hastening to take in all she could from this corner of the earth into which she had dropped for a few weeks; she had been out rowing before breakfast. Her triumphant health revolted Marie; and remembering how she had seemed to be reading into the very depths of her heart, instinctively Marie took to flight and went out into the corridor.

She made for her room; it was still empty. Then, going up to the desk on which Annette was accustomed to rest her elbow, for a long time she stroked it with the same gesture she had used that night to smooth down Annette's moist hair.

A rumor of children tumbling into their places . . . Class beginning . . . And the minutes passing so slowly. . . .

There must have been something desperate in her

look; two or three children examined her stealthily. Or perhaps they noticed only the unwashed pallor of her face?

Annette's substitute took her place. Marie avoided looking at her, yet the child was forever under her eyes. Marie blamed herself for having permitted this substitution; once again she felt a foreboding.

In the room, out there in the suburbs, Annette was suffering as the malady made its horrible progress. She was being consumed with fever. She was aching in all her frail joints. Was she being submissive? Was she still drinking, as she should, and accepting the proper attentions?

Though Marie never for a moment ceased explaining the various difficulties, commenting upon the text, soliciting answers and guiding the understanding of the less alert, her mind was by the bedside where she had sat all night. There were two women dwelling within her side by side yet without reciprocal communication, for she of the vexed anguish was not listening to the other, whose lucid intelligence was focussed upon her daily task more intensely than

usual and with a kind of exacerbated penetration. She did not listen to her, she did not even hear her, save at rare intervals, when she was amazed to witness this seemingly alien activity; her own consciousness went no further than the door of the sick room, where she was even now choking with terror, as her breath rose and fell on the same, precipitate rhythm. . . .

XXXVIII

THE morning dragged on slowly. Noon came at last. Marie had barely enough time to go out for news of Annette. Intending to take the street-car, she went to the station. But she dared not climb in. Her insistence suddenly struck her as unjustifiable in a mother's eyes; it betrayed the madness of an attachment which should remain unknown. "What harm is there in it?" she asked precisely as she was forbidding herself to divulge her passion.

This realization filled her with misgiving. Were

there not enough barriers between Annette and Marie already? Must Marie's scruples make her forego a few niggardly minutes whose span was perhaps already numbered?

Marie stood on the curb, amazed at the sudden revelation of what amounted to a fault, a secret guilt. People passed to and fro but Marie paid no heed, stood motionless. She did not even feel the sun as it beat down upon her. She was a stranger to the mobs that poured forth from the factories nearby, just as she had been a stranger to her class, retreating far within herself into those depths where the most obscure and the most acute sensations mingle and where suddenly certitudes break fulgurant. Marie's was that of a violation, a theft, a monstrous desire to possess by force.

No rule forbade such rape, yet in her own eyes she was mortally guilty. Would Annette have suffered as much without her? Had not Annette come to feel lonely simply because she had helped her, even without premeditation, to weave about herself an absolute world, whence her mother, whom she should have

venerated in her very weaknesses, suddenly appeared as one fallen?

In a sudden flash of remembrance, Marie saw a little shelf above the row of medicine bottles on the bedside table. On this shelf stood the photograph of the man Annette resembled, set between flowers of sea-shells, as on an altar. Indifferent to everything that was not directly concerned with the struggle Annette was making, Marie had not thought of examining this photograph more closely. Would this altar have existed save for Marie's teaching? And the jealous memory, the stern judgment passed upon those who betray death, who cannot stop living on the brink of a grave?

"No, no!" she protested, "that dated from before my time." She felt that she must reassure herself, and once again she called to mind the heart-rending confession in Annette's essay last October, the confession which had made her look at Annette for the first time.

"Mademoiselle Pascal!"

François Hamel stood beside her, hat in hand, his face with its regular features quite close to hers. He

looked at her, surprised that she had not raised her head at his first call.

"What about Annette?" Marie asked anxiously.

"No change. More or less the same. But she calls for you constantly. You cannot imagine how often. A real infatuation!"

A blush spread over Marie's long freckled face.

"Now when we want to make her mind, we say: 'I'll tell Mademoiselle Pascal!' It works like a charm. Never a fit of caprice, no objection!"

"What about a nurse?"

"No sign of one yet. There are so few here. But we have until tomorrow. Madame Rieu will sit up tonight."

"Ah," Marie said vaguely, feeling dispossessed.

"Yes, it tires her dreadfully," he went on, "she is not a strong woman. Not like you. No one would ever dream you sat up all last night."

"That is so, isn't it?" Marie affirmed. "I don't feel a bit tired!"

He moved off in the sunlight. Marie took in his supple walk, that vitality in him, like a fine, happy

animal's, that prodigality of joy with which his youth endowed his every gesture.

"How women must love him!" she said, as she thought of Madame Rieu.

XXXIX

THE infection had spread to the second lung. François Hamel informed her of this in the drawing-room, where she sat waiting for news.

"The doctor told me as he left. He did not dare tell her mother."

Marie felt the words strike her, sink deep within her, gnaw at her very vitals.

"Is he very much worried?" she asked.

"Yes, he's anxious, very anxious."

François Hamel went off to fetch the local midwife, who was competent to scarify and cup. Marie stayed in the small drawing-room, where two days before she had sat consumed with anguish. What right had she to rush to the bedside, to fly to the menaced child?

"My child! My little girl!"

The words overflowed from her heart; she rehearsed, without actually uttering them, like a litany of despair. Then she tried to recall the various dates. Annette had fallen ill on Wednesday. She counted: Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday. . . . Today was the fifth day. Four more, and they would know. She did not finish the thought even to herself. Yet she knew that, whenever her will failed, she saw no other picture. In a flash she saw her lying there, rigid. She smelled the odor of death. She tumbled into a deserted world in which Annette no longer was. That world surrounded her. An empty world.

"O God!" she implored, "O God!"

Something opened out within her. A cry rising toward she knew not what. A plea couched in the most childish words:

"My life for hers!"

She offered the bargain without knowing to whom she spoke. But she could not have lived a moment longer, had she not made this offer. Her tense strength was broken. Her will to prevent death fell away. Her nothingness was now but a supplication.

Madame Rieu came downstairs. She too foresaw disaster. But for François Hamel's assurance that she knew nothing, Marie would have vowed that the doctor had warned her. She wrung Marie's hand, dragged her along:

"Come!"

She did not speak another word. Silently she readmitted the other (whom she had accepted for one night of extreme fatigue and under stress of material necessity) into the domain from which, refreshed, she had immediately excluded her.

Marie understood that Madame Rieu was abandoning her prerogatives as a mother, that she was no longer morally strong enough to continue the struggle. The first time, only her body had yielded; now it was her soul. She had need of an ally; perhaps at bottom she rejoiced that another woman should be ready, like her, to furnish suffering, to share the burden.

Marie could hear Annette's gasping breath, even before she opened the door. The small, ashen face on the wide bed was now no more than a glance. Doubtless a few moments ago the mother had said: "I

shall fetch Mademoiselle Pascal." For Annette's glance seemed to have stared long at the door and, as Marie entered, it fastened upon her with such intensity that Marie suddenly believed she read in it the great, searching question that peers from out of the eyes of the dead.

XL

THEY were both there when the midwife came to put on the cups, made a rapid cross-shaped incision on the red spots left by these cups, and put on the glasses, standing by until the blood ran. As the midwife removed the full cups, Marie held the basin into which the other poured them. She felt the hot blood between her fingers. Annette's blood, Annette's very life!

The child was moaning feebly; she could no longer control her starts as they tore the cups off. She was only a tiny thing, slight as though her whole frame were melting away. They washed the wounds with al-

cohol, then wrapped her up again in a damp compress, Marie on the right, the mother on the left, mute, allied.

The child was weltering, beyond any possible preference, in an abyss of unconsciousness, plunged into it by the burning, whistling fever that thinned out the oppressive rattle of her breathing. She was a little, dying beast, cowering and withdrawing within herself, or already lost to herself, her soul well-nigh fled. For a moment Marie bent over the open eyes; but they gave no sign of recognition.

The doctor came back before nightfall, examined the temperature chart, took her pulse, listened to the lungs. As though not fully awakened from her first torpor, the child obeyed with difficulty. The doctor's orders had to be repeated several times:

"Count. Twenty-one. Twenty-two. . . ."

"Mademoiselle Pascal, her teacher. She is helping me look after her," Madame Rieu had explained.

"I am a nurse," Marie added.

The doctor did not give his verdict. He looked at the mother, then at her assistant. He was an old man. Perhaps not a very skilful one, Marie thought sud-

denly, and started up instinctively as if she could possibly run elsewhere to seek more certain aid, to find a savior.

He followed Madame Rieu into the dressing-room to complete his investigation; then he returned, alone, one moment before Madame Rieu reappeared.

It lasted only one second. He looked at the bed, at the small, shrunken form; he shook his head; and his glance, eloquent with despair, answered Marie's unformulated question.

XLI

SHE was delirious. Her voice, its tone changed in illness, grew as grave as that of an adult. In shreds of sentences, she denounced the sorrows of her childish life. To understand her properly, Marie had to piece together her scattered sentences and isolate, from her verbiage, the more significant words. She was constantly calling for her father; indeed, the childish appellation of *Papa* often punctuated her ramblings. The

Christian names of her little comrades appeared often amid incoherent phrases. Presently Annette made repeated efforts to rise. This was the hour when normally she would have gone to class. Each time she sought to raise herself on the bed, either Madame Rieu or Marie caught her hands gently and laid her down again. She also said "Mademoiselle" several times, in accents as soft as a sigh; Marie, unable to control herself, wept bitterly while the mother looked on with wide-eyed sorrow. Her dilated pupils changed the expression of her face and gave rise to another woman for whom Marie felt an immense pity.

"Does she realize how she has made Annette suffer?" Marie asked herself, her anxiety on this point increasing her discomfiture. Nothing, however, indicated that Madame Rieu had understood.

"It's her earliest sorrow coming back to her, you see," she said. "People think children forget; but they remember everything."

Marie understood how completely the mother had misunderstood a heart gnawed by regret, by grief, by jealousy.

"She was always so afraid of being late for

school," Madame Rieu added. "The thought is still tormenting her."

Marie, bending over the oxygen tank, vouchsafed no answer. Her strength had fled. Now she was but a beggar prepared for every humility. She was thinking of Mademoiselle Weil-Lévy, of the gesture she had made towards the great Christ. She blamed herself for not having said: "Pray for her!" to her colleague.

Shortly after midnight, the door opened softly. François Hamel's young, handsome face rose from among the shadows. He had come to find out how Annette was progressing. Marie perceived him as through a dream in which everything appears quite natural and acceptable. It never occurred to her that his presence might disturb the child; but Madame Rieu rose quickly, went to him, sent him out.

The small hand, which Marie pressed against her lips, was burning up; she felt the atrocious heat, the tender fragility of it.

"O God! O God!"

She was offering everything to Him: her life, the joy of seeing Annette again. Let Annette live, and

anything would be acceptable. For a second, a desperate impulse moved her to promise this unknown power that she would avoid Annette, if the child were spared. The old instincts of sacrifice awoke within her. And still the muffled quavering voice stammered out its rambling words so rapidly as to make them often incomprehensible.

"I won't stand it!" she said very distinctly, of a sudden. "I shall go away!"

Then came fragments of poetry all mixed up together but which Marie, who knew the poems by heart, recognized easily. Then silence.

"I won't stand it," the voice had said, "I shall go away." What departure was she thinking of? What fright was upon her?

Marie drank in her words. She felt a great need of torturing herself by guessing the tortures Annette's soul had suffered.

"I am here, I am here!" she whispered softly, as though the child could be comforted.

"I won't stand it!" the jerky voice repeated obstinately, and Marie perceived that this delirium held the direst affliction that could possibly fall upon a

child. She kissed the small hand. She believed that her kiss could bring Annette security, and counterbalance this pervading anguish. But Annette seemed to be beyond reach of aid.

Madame Rieu had not returned. It was time to change Annette's compress. First Marie decided to call the mother; then she was afraid, for Madame Rieu's sake, of what Annette's delirium might reveal. She twisted the wet linen, freed the little inert body of the burning compress, put back the cold one, made it fast with bands. Tearfully she repeated the act of swaddling, sponged the child's brow, moistened her lips, and performed all the necessary attentions.

The child was a burning corpse, now, that breathed in short, wheezing spasms; she was far away from Marie, a stranger to everything, lost. . . .

The need for self-restraint was gone. Marie abandoned herself to her grief, now that no witness was there to see. At present, she did not believe it a privilege to be there. She sank into an abyss of despair, alone in the world, caught in a darkness over which floated the white rectangle of the bed, with the small streak of black hair. . . .

Annette had ceased speaking. The chill of the compress seemed to have calmed her. Imperceptibly, her breathing slackened.

"This is the end!" Marie murmured.

Quickly, she leaned over the oxygen-tank, seized the child's wrist. The pulse beat, but feebly, indistinctly, about to give out. Marie pushed aside the tank, ran into the dressing-room, found the camphorated oil, performing all these actions with utter precision, amazed at her coolness. The child started up as Marie gave the injection; then she moaned. Somebody came up the stairs peremptorily, opened the door.

"What's the matter?" a choking voice gasped. Turning round, Marie saw François Hamel and made a gesture of surprise.

"Where's Madame Rieu?"

"Downstairs. Is it the end?"

"No!" Marie answered. She held her fingers to the pulse; it was still wavering but could be felt more distinctly. Marie longed to drive out this man, whose existence had tortured Annette so grievously.

"I would not let Madame Rieu come up. I was so afraid that—"

Madame Rieu swept past him, ran to the bed and bent over the child. She stared at Marie with dilated pupils, questioning.

"A swoon, eh? Her pulse has risen again."

All three stood waiting, Marie on one side of the bed, the mother on the other, François Hamel in the shadow. At last:

"Why didn't you call me?" Madame Rieu demanded.

Marie felt a kind of suspicion weighing on her. Or was it only a suspicion of the horrible thing which seemed about to happen? Madame Rieu's voice was hard. Instinctively Marie recoiled.

"Go and fetch the doctor. We cannot stand by helpless."

François Hamel went out; the mother took possession of the child's bedside. Everything belonged to her again. She arranged the medicine bottles, plumped the pillows, which Marie had set aside a moment before, and smoothed the sheets. Her gestures seemed to

efface the stranger's touch. The rattling in the child's throat came more faintly; her respiration was effortful, terrible. Sitting aside, on her chair at the foot of the bed, Marie sought to measure its frequence by her own heartbeats. But her own heart was pounding so hard that she could judge nothing by it. Every thought in her being was focussing upon that mechanical count, to the point of obsession; it was like a fit of insanity in which she reckoned the numbers one by one, shied at the hundreds and began again endlessly, seeking an indication of hope.

XLII

HOPE returned only two days later after forty-eight hours of feverish paroxysms and of delirium so violent that the spasmodic words were quite unintelligible. But the heart, sustained by digitalis, performed its labor properly and struggled against the disease.

Bent in the darkness over the bed where the little

girl was fighting for her life, Madame Rieu and Marie seemed twin coalescent wills; nevertheless Marie felt that the other's mistrust was enduring and her aversion growing. Madame Rieu never left her. The pair performed their duties alternately, but neither went downstairs on any account. They ate in the sick-room, standing on their feet while they did so; as for sleep, each granted the other a few minutes of unconsciousness in an armchair, which had been rolled back in a corner of the room. But whenever the child emerged from her torpor, during those rare moments of respite, Madame Rieu always managed to send Marie out to the dressing-room to prepare a potion or to perform some service. She sought unconsciously to keep Marie away, to stay alone by the child; and Marie, who had seen the limit of Madame Rieu's resistance, was amazed to find her standing up under the most incredibly severe trials.

François Hamel slept downstairs, prepared to go for help at any moment.

At dawn on the seventh day, the fever broke. The kidneys eliminated freely again. When the doctor came at seven o'clock, beginning his round of visits

with the child, Marie understood from the expression of relief on his face that Annette was saved.

Indeed, now he could answer for everything; even the defervescence held no terror for him. The heart would hold; the disease was completing its normal cycle. Then Marie suddenly realized that she had missed her classes for two days without even offering an excuse. She wished to leave; Madame Rieu offered no objection.

"You must go and rest now. You will, eh? I shall send Monsieur Hamel to you with news. It will save your tiring yourself out by coming back. Besides, all danger is past."

Marie left the house.

Outside she reeled and tottered, wounded by the light, lost in a sort of intoxication induced by sleeplessness and strain. Her joy of deliverance hurt her; it was too sudden; the stubborn images of death had not yet been effaced from her mind. That icy edge of white drapery floating on the wind, which so often had beaten in her thought, still rose before her. The silence, and the dense atmosphere peculiar to death

rooms, seemed to be following her along the road, streaked with rails and echoing with footsteps.

She took a street-car back to town. She went off to her classes, to her work. But her heart was free of its usual worry. Not once did she think either of the pupils, who were waiting for her, or of the discipline which, in her inability to consider anything beyond Annette's peril, she had cast off.

The station lay flat in its hollow. A great bustle filled the main street. Marie caught sight of the square and, above it, the apartment where for nine years her life had found refuge. It looked like a fantastic stage-setting. All habit was broken. Anguish had cut her loose from everything. She was passing through the kind of crisis in which the first hand laid on a person's shoulder and the most unforeseen order of departure finds him willing to go to the ends of the earth.

Annette would live. It surprised Marie that her deliverance was a mere abstract certitude, that it was quite void of emotion, that the same contraction and the same anguished suspense endured in her heart.

The Principal made no trouble about excusing her absence when she saw her ravaged face; her pupils met her with an instinctive compassion that made them silent and as though dismayed. Marie looked at them through the same eyes that had followed the progress of Annette's illness; it was as if that face of terror must always be hers, as if a dynamic of pain prevented her from ceasing to suffer, even though she knew her pain was futile.

"Forty-one, forty-two, forty-three. . . ."

In spite of the words she was speaking to the class, within herself Marie, still moved by her obsession, counted the numbers to infinity. No joy existed. It was only her mind that knew; the rest of her being still bore its anguish, it had not suffered the truth to permeate, it had not banished its poisons.

She felt a sense of loss, a painful destruction of balance in not being in attendance on the child. She still waited for the time to change the wet compress, to administer the potion. She was preparing Annette's brew. Her hands spread sheets, raised pillows. No, she felt no joy. Her mind alone was steeped in certitude. But that was in a region beyond her reach, far

above that in which she was still writhing on the rack.

Three hours of teaching that morning, two that afternoon. At noon, she refused to return home; instead she lunched in the station buffet, amid a bustle of coming and going, of confusion and departure. Nothing was permanent in the world, nothing solid, definitive. She felt dizzy at the disintegration, the instability of everything. The whistle of a train tore the air. Suddenly Marie was seized with a desire to take Annette to her home during her convalescence. She forgot the utter impossibility of it. She saw herself taking the child away; and the certitude, hitherto abstract, that Annette was saved, seemed suddenly to pierce her heart. But it was only a flash. She sank back into her anguish. As she faced her class and saw Angèle Desrousseaux sitting in Annette's place, she was again visited by a chill foreboding and again amazed at having tolerated the substitution. Annette's little neighbor looked up at Marie; she seemed intrigued. It occurred to Marie that Angèle knew where she had spent the last two days; no doubt the child had seen her going into Madame Rieu's house.

After class Marie stopped in the Teachers' Room

for a minute. She was not obliged to answer questions about her health, as she had been at noon. The demands of politeness had been satisfied; indifference offered itself once more as a haven of refuge. She was glad that the athletic substitute made no inquiries, that the others gave her no more than the swift nod and the collective "Good night" directed to the room, rather than to any particular person.

Marie felt she must rest and catch her breath before her return to her apartment and to normal life. Surprised suddenly at the realization of this fright:

"Have I so soon grown used to considering Annette's presence indispensable?" she wondered.

Then, still deeper within herself:

"Did I actually experience joy at being beside her?" she asked, revolted. "Did I feel a joy in the depths of my anguish, a joy in spite of everything?"

In her own eyes, she appeared monstrous, incomprehensible. . . . She stopped.

"Annette is alive! What does the rest matter? She is alive!"

. . . At this very moment Madame Rieu was looking after her. Perhaps François Hamel had come back

into the room. Marie saw him again, a clumsy, kindly young man, trying to makes no noise, the lover who, in Annette's eyes, was like an older brother.

Then Marie turned back to examine herself again, and again she faced the discovery of a vile joy that could endure even in the jaws of death. She grew frightened, sought to rise out of the abyss which she saw in herself for the first time, lost her footing, was forced to catechize herself again. Was such love permissible? Did others love like that? She refused to answer the question.

From the court below, the cries of the children rose in moving sheaves, like rockets, made of a myriad awns, exploding now together, now separately, and falling to earth only to rise again.

"When Annette was quite small, she must have run about there. She must have cried with that same thin, piercing, joyful voice; she must have made a sharp, sweet twittering. I was there too. And I did not know!"

In her imagination, she was bending over the tiny child Annette had been. Then at last she confessed her oppression:

"And now what shall I do?"

Her use had ceased. A terrible fatigue beat down upon her. She sat down, she would have wished to lie down on the ground, in sleep, in oblivion, out of existence. She felt the weight of Annette's body in her hands. Again she counted, as though she were timing the gasping breath.

Far away, there, the sun had sunk a little; it was hiding behind a chestnut tree and the shadow allowed them to part the curtains in order to ventilate the room. How did Annette feel? Was she sleeping well now? Was she recovering from her oppression? Ah, to go back, to go back and see her again!

She rose, intending to depart. She swayed.

Mademoiselle Weil-Lévy's voice, her toneless soft voice, always pitched on that distant note and deprived of all human ardor, reached Marie's ears. Then Marie caught sight of her, at the other end of the room, slowly putting on her gloves and looking at her.

And Mademoiselle Weil-Lévy, in her flat voice, suggested softly:

"Do you want me to see you to your door?"

XLIII

"AM I so completely exhausted?" Marie wondered. "Can a woman be so prodigal of her strength that it flows out like a fluid and never returns to the body?"

For the last three days, she had tried in vain to perform the gestures of her ordinary life. Even the automatism of habits seemed broken; and her small apartment had become foreign ground. She collided with the furniture, was never able to find anything. The objects she had assembled there, bought out of her scant savings, chosen with great care and sometimes coveted for a long time, were in no way dear to her; indeed they were almost a burden. Within the emptiness of her soul, she aspired only to move through abstraction; bare walls, a narrow cell, a bed of planks. She longed for these; such a dwelling seemed the only place where her denuded heart could find shelter.

When Mademoiselle Weil-Lévy had taken her home, she had followed submissively. Together, they had climbed the ladder-like wooden stairway, penurious as in all the old houses of Amiens.

Mademoiselle Weil-Lévy had ceased talking. She felt that, so far, she could do nothing for this soul. What, indeed, could she ever do? Was Marie's the sort of soul that can obtain its salvation from others?

After they had gone into the little room which served at once as drawing-room, dining-room and study, Mademoiselle Weil-Lévy had merely asked:

"What of your little invalid?"

She had believed the child dead; that doubtless, was why she had waited until then. She had been afraid Marie might burst into tears.

"Saved!" Marie had told her in a choking voice.

Since then, Marie had often repeated the word to herself and always it echoed, deep within her, with the same choking of tears. She had attributed it to fatigue; but surely the balance of normalcy was re-established after three nights spent sunk in an abyss of sleep, three days of voracious meals—the hunger

and sleep of an exhausted beast? And almost nothing had changed: things still failed to touch her. A division had occurred between all that was her past and herself—or rather between her past and the new self which, to the detriment of her own soul, was coming to be. As yet unorganized, struggling to exist and not yet extant, it was like that terrible life which is born confusedly out of the destruction of bodies.

The weather was very hot. The persistent days extended, swallowed up the night. And Marie did not understand why this light hurt her, just as the sight of Annette's little comrades hurt her. She would have wished to abandon school, to flee to her grandparents', to await the word from Madame Rieu that would summon her. For Madame Rieu had not sent her any message since the first evening when François Hamel had come to set her mind completely at rest.

In his haste, the young man had been unwilling to take a seat. In answer to her breathless questions:

"Yes," he had said, "the fever is breaking properly. Everything is following a normal course. There's no danger at all now. The child is well, quite well."

Then he had rushed away again, the stairs creaking under his swift, heavy step, as he fled into the night.

Ever since, Marie had waited. She felt that she must wait. During the last nights of their vigil, she had understood the mother's jealousy and mistrust all too clearly. Now she was trying to allay them by her absence; fiercely she resisted her desperate need of seeing Annette again.

Sometimes she caught herself looking at the clock and marking the hours. "Ten minutes more and it will be time to change her compress!" Marie would shake her head, return to the correction of the themes that had accumulated during the days of her anguish. The words danced before her eyes, with the touching irregularity of curves still uncertain, the fantasy of letters not yet stereotyped, the naïveté of conscious elegances, the sudden awkwardness of fatigue. All these different styles of writing suggested Annette's, because they belonged to children; yet in the midst of these essays, Marie missed Annette just as she did in the midst of class. Faced with all these papers spread out on the table, she saw only one gap, just

as she always saw only an empty place in spite of Annette's aggressive little substitute.

"She will come back! She will come back!"

Marie repeated the words almost aloud. She glanced at the calendar, counted the days that remained before the long vacation. Thirty-seven. Was this the interval sufficient for a convalescence? Or would the child be swallowed up in another class and given to another teacher next autumn? Would she lose Annette?

Marie gave a start, pondered the possibility of continuing to spread her love over the child, and, in order to follow her for twelve months more, determined to ask for Eight B the following year. It was not impossible; she would try it. She drew up her arguments, thought carefully of how she would present them at the Teachers' Meeting, when they were assigning the various future duties. She would abandon the humility of the newcomer, which had always made her accept the junior classes. She gathered courage as she thought of her professional record, of the recent inspection, the official's approval and his offer of an appointment in Paris. If she met with any resistance, she would

write to him. She would not suffer the child to be torn away from her.

This hope filled her with such joy that she cast caution to the winds. Annette must know that she could probably follow her another year. She snatched up her purse, her gloves and hastened down.

The square was filled with children and a whole crowd of yokels, who, having come into town to market, were eating while they waited for their trains. That square, littered with crumpled newspapers and dirty refuse, was different indeed from the faery garden over which Marie had watched the seasons spread. She crossed it, climbed into an overcrowded street-car, once again made the familiar journey between houses which, fast as the city disappeared, shrank to leave room for a few trees and for small, spare gardens, carefully tended.

Annette's house stood before her. She rang, growing suddenly timid. Since the danger was past, and Marie had re-entered into the world of convention and propriety, everything seemed strange to her. The servant came to open, knotting a white apron over her country dress.

"Mademoiselle Annette is still improving," she said. "If Mademoiselle can wait, Madame will come right down."

The drawing-room, in which Marie waited, was cold, too, with the stiffness of official rooms. The divan no longer bore the imprint of a body that had lain upon it, heavy with fatigue. Marie thought of that moment when the mother had fallen asleep. . . .

XLIV

SHE had been forced to listen to that chatter, which had so quickly become the ordinary volubility of a woman not very intelligent, still young, and coquettish. She had been forced to see that face too much made-up, to smell that too strong perfume, to hear that too sonorous laughter.

How quickly the anguish had vanished! Joy overflowed from the body radiant with satisfaction. Because this suspicion skimmed her, Marie could no longer banish it. Madame Rieu's brilliant eyes spoke

of love resumed as soon as the anguish was over; Marie saw it in a kind of fulness of voice and gesture, in the dazzling splendor of her fair complexion, the softness of her skin under which the rich blood flowed abundantly. And her lush phrases, exaggerating her gratitude, sounded as though laden with a cooing of caresses:

"You'll have been the one who saved her! Who can tell if I would have thought of camphorated oil? Mothers are too excitable to make good nurses. They lose their heads."

Marie staggered as though suddenly stabbed in the heart. She could imagine Madame Rieu telling Annette:

"It was very lucky, that Mademoiselle Pascal happened to be here, you know. As for me, I was overwrought with sorrow; I was quite beyond myself. I could not have thought of everything as a stranger could."

Nor, possibly, did Annette understand what strength quickens such love as can conquer terror, to become a discipline of will, an instrument of salvation.

"Would you like to come and see your little pupil?

The doctor left strict orders that she must not tire herself out . . . but for a short visit. . . ."

The mother, it was, who gauged the risk, who disposed. Marie could but obey.

There were the stairs to climb with her trembling legs; the door behind which she heard the short, panting breath. Then Marie once more saw the child's room, the little dark head on the white pillow, the wide eyes in the thinned face and a glance of joy and timidity rising towards her.

"Mademoiselle!"

That name, sweet, on these lips, as a Christian name, trembled so fervently, so charged with happiness, that the mother could not fail to understand. Marie was afraid; she sought to impose caution. But the child could not master her heart. Tears streamed over her face, and, for all Marie's denials, for all her attempts to obtain silence, Annette repeated in passionate accents:

"But for you, what would have become of me? But for you, what would have become of me?"

Incensed, the mother finally commanded:

"Annette, the doctor forbids you to get excited. I

shan't bring Mademoiselle Pascal up to see you, next time she calls, if you talk like that."

For she possessed every right, even that one; Marie knew it and dared no longer move. She was afraid that the slightest affectionate gesture would rouse the child to exaltation; so she stood rigid beside the bed, with the same official constraint, which she immediately assumed in class when an inspector entered the room.

Marie longed to shout her joy, to press against her that little body into which life had returned; she longed to dry Annette's tears. Yet all the words she spoke gave proof of no more vital interest than that of any stranger in a sick child. The mother had forced her to rear a wall about herself, to deprive the child of that vehement heart, which was hushed. Annette's emotion died down too. Did she remember the distracted woman who rocked her in her arms? Did she confront her with this frigid, motionless woman? And did she doubt Marie's love? Was Marie unwillingly bringing disappointment and grief to her?

Marie must leave, she must put an end to this racking constraint. She spoke the words of farewell. Annette started up again:

"You'll come back."

"Yes, Annette, I'll come back soon."

"Tomorrow? Why not tomorrow?"

"Mademoiselle Pascal has classes, you know that quite well. Be reasonable."

"That is true," Marie conceded.

"Children are always apt to impose on people!" Madame Rieu added.

The child held her peace. A disconsolate look came into the dark, beautiful eyes. As she embraced her, Marie tried to put such gentleness in her kiss that the child would feel consoled, reassured. But Annette did not understand. She only felt that the being she needed was fleeing, that she would be left alone again. And, dangerously, she repeated in front of the mother:

"You mustn't forsake me."

"What tyrants children are!" Madame Rieu said, as she escorted Marie downstairs. "But please don't tire yourself out on her account. You have done enough, all too much for us. How can I express my gratitude?"

She held Marie's hand, yet Marie felt the hostility under her effusion. That hand pressing hers gave her

a feeling of secret repugnance. The hand of the passionate woman who caressed François Hamel and after that dared touch the child.

Marie did not say to herself: "So much the better if he is there! Because of him she has become the casual mother she is!" She did not even think: "Her jealousy is fleeting. Only danger wakened a violent maternal instinct within her. I have but to wait."

A feverish haste forced her to reject concessions and exhausted her patience. Annette must not suffer!

That evening she wrote to the child.

XLV

"I WROTE to you, Annette, because we never have time to speak to each other any more."

The child blushed; Marie was almost as confused as she. She felt that she was beginning to live in duplicity and that she was drawing the child into it.

Annette pressed the little paper in her hand so

quickly that she seemed to be resuscitating a gesture she knew already, a gesture perhaps inherited: that of all women who hide and deceive. So great was her surprise, that Marie could not read the joy in it.

Madame Rieu came in almost at once. Her short, wavy hair shone less brightly than her radiant face.

"Would you believe that Annette wanted to work? I had to keep her texts and note books away from her. She says that she will drop behind, that she will have to fall back a class. Do you think that six weeks' absence, at the end of the year, can put her back so far?"

"No, I think not. Especially if she works a little during the holidays. I shall be able to look after her in September."

"But you won't be here?"

"We shall correspond. Perhaps you might let me take charge of her. I shall be staying in the country with my grandparents. It would do her no harm."

"Oh!" the child cried, stifling with happiness.

"She'll have only just enough time to recover her strength between now and October. So much the worse

for her studies! Besides, can you see yourself burdened with her?"

"I'll be so good!" Annette promised.

"Yes, yes, she's quiet enough when nobody opposes her," Madame Rieu continued, "but it's no gift to make you. As it is, you know only her better side. But if you could see her every day."

Tears came to Annette's eyes as she heard the accusation. What utter incomprehension on the part of the mother! Marie guessed that in no other being was the child's reflection so deformed. She felt that she alone knew the feelings of this heart, prematurely awakened. Who else, in truth, understood that such fits of bad temper were born of a troublous jealousy, of Annette's recoil from the man who had taken her rightful place against her mother's shoulder? To him, went all the words of tenderness; for him, the voice which said "Annette" so distraitly, grew slower, suddenly, and lingering with delight upon the sibilant, uttered his name with all the languor of a sigh.

"*Franz. . . .*"

And the man was so young, too; surely he was more like an intrusive brother whom the mother favored?

"As for me, I love Annette with all my heart," Marie mused. "I shall never love anyone but her." And, turning to Madame Rieu:

"No child is without fault," she said, "but I'm sure we shall get on quite well together. And she'll work hard if you leave her to me."

"It would be asking too much of you," Madame Rieu protested feebly.

A tremulous hope in Marie's heart. If she took the child, would not the mother have every liberty? What a burden to her passion the little worried presence must be, and the light footstep which can never be heard from a distance and her inalienable right to open doors without warning.

"On the contrary," Marie explained, "it would be a diversion for me. After a month's rest I grow so bored, so weary of inactivity. Just as others crave entertainment, I need to teach. The old house is a large one; the child would cheer my grandparents up. If it could be done . . . if you were willing. . . . And then you can set your mind at rest: she would be well looked after."

"I know!" the mother said dreamily. And Marie

longed to lull her with her words, and, adding the temptation which was perhaps already rising behind her bowed forehead:

"He will be alone with you!" she longed to say. "All restraint will vanish. Yours will be the heavenly freedom of doing as you will. You can linger belated in the garden, or open your window on the summer air, without ever fearing the watchful eyes of a child. You can speak those words you hush regretfully because, at any moment a small dark head may rise before you. There will be no past for you—ah, do you ever think of one?—no past; no age; nothing that recalls another life, lived before the new life that your new love gives you; nothing—do you sometimes read it in his eyes suddenly grown wistful?—that rears so dangerous a background to your love."

XLVI

JUNE was drawing to an end. A sudden invasion of drouth and dust swept over the country that had been

washed so long with rain. The sky baked the little court below, where the tots played; the children, enervated by the heat, screeched all the louder.

In class, on the contrary, Marie's pupils grew more languid. The boyish Coutenier ceased to ask ridiculous questions; and beautiful Solange, invoking the heat as an excuse for leaving off her smock, exhibited light, flowery dresses, under which her frail adolescent shoulders and her firm round arms shone like alabaster.

It became impossible to rouse their slumbering attention. The whole countryside, of which they had been deprived by eight months of classes, flamed in golden mirages before the eyes of the little boarders; and the city-dwellers longed to escape from the close houses, from the torrid streets, from the moldy stench of fermentation and household ordures that swelled the gutters. The trees in the public gardens could no longer cheat the children's impatience. Their parched lips spoke the names of the summer resorts, where they were to join their friends, to resume old habits, or, at times, to discover a new country. They exchanged future addresses surreptitiously; and their

texts, lying open before them, were so many blank pages on which their day-dreams wrote the burden of their desires.

Each year Marie used this expectation to give them literary pictures to feed on. She read poems evocative of golden days, of dark verdure, of pallid waters. The children leaned over imaginary rivers; listened to crickets shaking the grasses with their soft chirping; already they drank in the beauty of summer, and Marie smiled as she watched their smooth faces, followed their dreamy glances. She told herself that the ideas which she had sown in them were like germs entrusted to warmth: they would rise slowly during the summer; they would spread more swiftly than seed; they would bear fruit in the autumn, and, in October, they would seat children completely transformed on the benches of a new class. Each year at this season Marie suffered from this multiple farewell she was secretly taking of them all. The flight of time became poignantly clear to her. Once again she felt dispossessed, drained; she seemed to have lost these girls before they had begun to belong to others; she was given back to herself, like all true solitaries.

Seventy-five days of emptiness—which she apprehended! She foresaw that she would cheat her hunger as best she could; that she would read voraciously and take long walks abroad; that she would try to win the friendship of such spirits as her books embodied and of all the familiar things in the old house; and that she would not be alone. . . . True, but what would she have to give?

This year no such fright and regret stirred her. The little passers-by might disappear, embarking upon this great lake of time, never again to touch the opposite shore. Was she even sure whether she had known them? Did she remember the first weeks when, as every year, she had sought them so diligently?

For a long time now she had had nothing in common with them. With their gestures and noise, they had merely troubled the solitude which had encompassed her the day she met Annette, and which had accompanied her when, for the first time, she crossed the desert—the desert through which he whose passion isolates him, must wander on with eyes straining after a single image. . . .

XLVII

MARIE prepared her campaign boldly. At the last Teachers' Meeting of the term, when they assembled to assign the duties for the following year, she had ceased to be the meek, modest woman who invariably took what the others left and who seemed willing to bury herself in minor work as though unworthy of anything better. This time she asserted herself. Her pale brow, with its dull auburn hair, shone across the shadows of the cloistral room where the Principal held council. She resisted their protests, invoked custom; she desired to continue next year with the children she had molded, to follow them into the Eighth Grade after having had them in the Seventh.

"But why? Why?" Mademoiselle Audié's sharp voice queried. "You were accustomed to that class."

Marie flushed as though they read her secret.

"I'm tired of endlessly teaching the same subjects."

"But the government regulations state specifically

that it is advisable for teachers to keep the same courses."

"It is far more advisable for teachers not to grow weary of their subjects."

She answered harshly. The Principal, slow to decision, was looking for a solution. She recalled the Inspector's last report. She wavered, hesitating to oppose Marie, yet unwilling to create discontent; she seemed ready to obey the most emphatic opinion and to allow the quarrel to resolve itself.

But Marie was determined to win. A sort of hostile frenzy urged her against the woman who was trying to take Annette away from her.

"I shall appeal to the Inspector," she almost shouted.

"It's quite true that for the last nine years Mademoiselle Pascal—"

The Principal intervened. Her difficulty in expressing herself impeded her phrases: but she was ready to support Marie so long as Marie had support elsewhere.

"Let us give Mademoiselle Pascal the Eighth

Grade. Mademoiselle Audié can have it back the following year."

"This is the first time she has ever asked for anything," Mademoiselle Hatsfeld interrupted, "it's only fair!" Her great trumpeting voice drowned out the last rumors of protest.

Marie held her peace. To have expressed her wishes and defended her happiness seemed to her beyond her possibilities. She sat motionless before the eternal book in which it was her duty, as junior, to enter the minutes of the meetings.

Dominique Allary, the substitute teacher of English, smiled approbation; there was, Marie believed, a note of mockery in her expression. Marie turned her head, buried herself in her notes. But her breath came faster and her hand trembled as she wrote.

Happiness blossomed forth within her. For a whole year more, she would maintain her pleasant friendship with the child. She would hear Annette's dancing step in the corridor; she would see Annette sitting in front of her; in her imagination, she would mentally stroke Annette's bowed head. She would model this young soul in her own image, she would

realize the perfect identity which all loves seek in vain. She would possess a daughter of her thought, similar to herself. She would avoid the immense disappointment of mothers who suddenly discover a stranger, or even an enemy, in the child of their flesh.

"Annette, my very soul!"

Amid all these austere, neutral, dismally plain women wrangling over class prizes, adding up columns of points and forever exacting mathematical touchstones, Marie sat radiant with hope, shuddering with joy. Happiness! Happiness! Marie was like the misty, rain-sodden earth of Picardy on which the summer sun had at last fallen.

Her eyes followed a flight of swallows; she was as an arrow speeding through the warm, vaporous air. She was escaping out of herself into a life that answered to the exigencies of her heart. Madame Rieu's vague acquiescence assumed the assurance of a promise. She would have Annette in her house. Already she rejoiced at hearing Annette's soft tread under her gloomy walls; she dreamed of happy nights in which she would listen to the child's soft breathing, almost indiscernible on the other side of the partition.

Then she would bring Annette back to town and both would again begin the year's cycle, which opens with autumnal mists, reaches its zenith in the frozen splendor of winter and declines as the light rises.

But she never dreamed that this year might come to an end.

She did not think to measure the space of her felicity. The precious twelvemonth vouchsafed to her stretched out before her as before the inexperience of a child: a vague incommensurable domain. . . .

XLVIII

THE letter was there. Marie, fingering it, doubted her very eyes. Then she laid it down on the table and re-read it once more. The sense of the words, which had first stunned her like a blow, became at once more complex and more reassuring. It was not, as she had supposed, a vast negation of her hopes. Probabilities edged their way into it in fleeing perspectives whence she recovered breath and life.

Madame Rieu wrote that on his last visit the doctor had insisted Annette go to the country immediately. Meanwhile Madame Rieu had received word from her mother-in-law inviting Annette to go to her in the Vosges country. She had gone with the child, and she was deeply sorry that she had been unable to take her leave of Marie and to express her gratitude for Marie's kindness and help. Annette, the mother added, was inconsolable. And, as though docile under another's dictation, the child's trembling hand had penned those sentences never uttered of children, which adults use to proclaim their politeness in conventional phrases and which are sincere only in the contraction of the downstroke, their lack of assurance, almost their visible pain.

XLIX

IN her mind Marie reviewed all the possible circumstances that could have governed Madame Rieu's sudden decision. One after another, she recalled the

occasions on which the mother had tacitly proclaimed her rights over the child; then she recalled the incessant guard Madame Rieu had mounted over her. Marie recognized this instinct of possession. She knew exactly when it had risen against her.

"Yes, it was that night when she found me alone by the bedside. I had just given the injection which rallied the failing heart and perhaps saved her life. François Hamel walked up first; he stood there, a little to one side. I can see her brushing me away from the bed. I can see her hands again, smoothing Annette's hair, blotting out the very traces of my hands.

"And during the next two nights," Marie went on, "when her anguish was so great that she overcame her desire to sleep, wasn't she driving herself to keep watch only because I was there? Yes, she was already intent on taking the child away from me. . . . No doubt she tolerated my presence in the room only because Annette no longer recognized either of us."

But Marie could not understand why this love had not made of her a more attentive mother.

"She could not even give the child her loyalty. She could not even love her above the needs of her body,

above the craving of her senses, above what was perhaps her love."

Marie could not comprehend a life divided. Her own absolute nature, finding expression in a single passion, made her unjust. It never occurred to her that the other might be suffering or that she should feel menaced. She saw only an abuse of authority, a constraint imposed upon Annette. She knew only revolt against a woman who was taking her child away from her. Passion led her astray.

"But I—I have only the child . . ." she said, trembling.

Shrill voices of children at play rose from the square below. The leaves were gray with dust. Dark, massive forms seemed to be heaped up on the benches, keeping a sinister watch over this bounding, chirping, dancing youth; they reigned as uncontested masters over all that whiteness.

"A life for a life!" Such was the law of the talion. Those who had given existence possessed that existence, even those who had become mothers against their will.

But the heart, had the heart no right whatever?

Could a woman experience motherhood only by chance or under compulsion? Was there absolutely nothing for those who went with a great emptiness in their hearts and who, seeing a child, suddenly felt that they had found their own?

Then Marie saw them in the train: Annette's little face sullen in resentment and Madame Rieu, voluble, her flesh tingling, still, with the caresses of another, her lips fresh from another's kiss. Marie grew indignant; she was amazed by the violence of her emotion. Again, from far off, she discerned the confused sentiments spoiling within her.

"Why must I inevitably imagine her with François Hamel?" she wondered. Marie did not realize that it was a secret jealousy and the anger of a frustrated being that created the obsession. She believed she was suffering only for Annette, whereas her suffering, more troublous, added a sort of shuddering envy to her grief, as she considered her all too fortunate rival.

Toward evening, calm returned to her. She read the letter again. The fury of her disappointment, her cries of revolt changed into what was almost hope.

She felt capable of every servility, of every lie. By affecting to consider this precipitate departure as quite natural, she would allay the mother's fears. She need but bide her time. Madame Rieu had not specified the length of her absence. Some day she would return; some day she would wish to be rid of an embarrassing witness, of Annette. . . .

Besides had not the following year been promised to Marie? And, after that, her whole life long?

L

FINAL Examinations were over. Many of the children had already left. Those who remained sat idly by their desks with but one object in view; to wait for a certain hour. The boarders crossed out the days on their calendars and, every morning, proclaimed the dwindling score that stood between them and the holidays.

Marie, also, waited. . . .

The prisoner of her dispossession, she bore within

her an impatience that gnawed at her breast, a blood that leapt as though to the attack of moveless time. Often she stared at the massive watch on her wrist, observing the slow progress of its hands, as the minutes passed slowly.

Estranged from all these children who had already escaped from her, she continued to teach nevertheless. But she was as far distant from the words she spoke, as the children were from the glances they raised towards her out of the wide eyes of childhood that seem to dilate and to open dark chalices like midsummer flowers.

In class, words alone reigned: words, neither thought by her nor received by them, words which mechanically unwound their sonorous films. She thought only of next year, of the months of holiday. Eleven weeks! As she reckoned the long interval, Marie envied the children. For them, waiting was a question of a small bundle of hours: but she would have so many days to count out one by one.

Each morning the number of children lessened. Now her pupils occupied only the front row benches; the class seemed to be melting out. . . .

In the corridors, the children's smocks disappeared from their hooks, too; and Marie watched these short, slight, gay-colored phantoms vanish, one after another. One afternoon she knew great joy. The intruder who occupied Annette's place had not come back; at last *her* place was empty.

That day, after the children had gone, Marie bent over Annette's desk. How often she had laid her hands upon it, seeking to clasp the shadow of the childish hands; those little hands with their square nails; almost unwrinkled and fresh, new! Marie raised the top of the desk; the supplanter had forgotten a few crumpled sheets that lay amid a litter of peanut shells. An odor of peppermint bonbons rose to her nostrils. She bent forward. Then, suddenly, far down in the corner on the right hand side, she saw her own name, carved into the wood with a knife.

"Marie!"

So the child had been calling her in secret. She *had.* Marie trembled on the brink of a discovery. Was she not the ideal mother that Annette had longed for? She blushed as though she were listening to another more intimate, more passionate confession before

which she hesitated, lost, not knowing what to believe or what answer to make.

"Marie!"

Outside, the summer day was dazzling, scorching. She repeated the twin syllables which suddenly took on a radiance. The interval of years was dissolved. Every barrier had fallen. Even the barrier of space, those miles which robbed her of Annette, almost ceased to exist. That name was like a breath against her cheek. At one fell swoop, it suppressed everything that had hurt her so desperately. Gone were the far country to which they had taken her, and the unknown village and that unfamiliar house; gone, too, the woman whom she had envied, the grandmother whose hands had swaddled Annette's father and were even now caressing Annette, touching Annette!

"Marie!"

Little shoulders, with such scant space for the breast . . . arms, stretched forward . . . the round, dark head . . . a head heavy in sleep drooping against her shoulder. . . . All the weight, all the density of her . . . and her odor, that warm, fleshy

odor, a trifle insipid, as of the young of animals, but sweet, piercing sweet. . . .

Marie crossed the square. A child, running forward, collided violently against her, caught, for a second, in her dress. She smiled as she freed it. It had a sickly, freckled face, a droll snub nose and the look of a little ruffian. Marie thought of Annette, of the tiny Annette she had never known, of the grandmother who had watched over her earliest infancy.

"A pale woman of Lorraine," Madame Rieu had said one day. "I don't know how she came to have such a dark son." Again the pale woman of Lorraine had taken control of the child. Might she not prove to be an ally?

The idea of going to her flashed through Marie's mind. She divined all the misunderstandings that lay between the old woman and Annette's mother. Suddenly, she hoped that the grandmother would understand her, Marie, that she would take her part. She need but go there to arrange everything, to regain the hope without which she could not go on living. And to

recover the small presence, too. For, this evening, she felt it so materially, and so close to her, that, before dropping off to sleep, she stretched out her arm and made a place for the heavy head, which weighed unreally in the hollow of her shoulder. . . .

LI

THE Principal turned around.

Her soft, washed-out face stood full in the light. A gleam rose in the depths of her dull, indifferent eyes. It was something so strange that Marie, suddenly distracted from her anguish, wondered at the significance of her glance.

"I, too, was young once, Mademoiselle Pascal—"

The old woman, establishing her past, claimed her right to figure still, at least through her memories, among the living. Marie was surprised that, for years, she had considered this woman no more than an instrument, wound up by some secret mechanism to fulfill her duties, a creature so unendowed with life as to

be incapable even of expressing herself, searching for words with utmost difficulty, imprisoned in her verbal impotence.

"I too have been a teacher—I too know what it means to have children before your eyes and to think—"

The clumsy, halting voice stopped again, struck a barrier. The little shawl, which she had thrown over her plump shoulders in spite of the summer heat, suddenly struck Marie as immensely comical. A sad comicality, the symbol of a wasted life.

The pale eyes stared out of the window, looked beyond the court. The open mouth seemed to seek for air and for words that would not come. Then the flabby face moved again.

Marie felt that this species of administrative phantom was uncovering her soul for possibly the first time in her life. A sudden sympathy mitigated her former repugnance. She blamed herself for having neglected to read this woman and to make of her a friend.

"Yes, we believe there might be another motherhood—for us—"

Below, in the court, children were shouting at their

play. Someone had thrown a ball up violently; it rose over the ledge of the high window, soared into the blue air, and fell downward. The gravel crunched under the feet scampering towards the place where it landed.

The Principal was lost in silence. She seemed frightened at having said so much. Her pudgy, wan hands sought the ends of the little shawl, tugged at them as though to fasten it more tightly over her, as though to wrap and hide her heart.

"Mademoiselle Pascal, your presence among us has become impossible."

"But why, Madame? Why?"

Marie had bounded up. So that was what she had failed to guess; that was why the Principal had summoned her after class. She felt her dependence. She understood that she was in a service, that she was submitted to an authority, that they could settle her fate. At first this alone struck home, as though the other wrench were imperceptible under this humiliation. She forgot that they were robbing her of even the privilege of seeing the child from afar; that it was to be a complete severance; that the child would not

return to school (the Principal had just told Marie) as Marie's pupil.

The colorless, dead eyes averted their questioning look. The soft hands smoothed the end of the shawl. The stuttering voice answered:

"You understand—yes, do understand me. . . . The mother maddened, talkative, perhaps downright wicked—and the people here—a small town! . . . There will be gossip. That is something we cannot tolerate. Don't interrupt me. My position is difficult—an atmosphere of suspicion—Mademoiselle Pascal, you can understand . . ."

"Don't I do my work properly?" Marie objected.

Then her resort to judgments passed upon her, like a servant quoting her references.

"Wasn't the Inspector's report favorable?"

Once again she saw the man who had visited her class. Wouldn't he understand? An immense need of being championed drove her to the memory of the benevolent passer-by who had paused an hour at her side.

"Your record is excellent, Mademoiselle Pascal, I know."

"Well then?"

"But you cannot stay here any longer. I don't want any trouble. You understand. I don't want any trouble—"

A flush spread over the livid face. Marie felt that she was about to regret the impulse which had drawn her closer to this stranger a few moments ago.

"I am in a difficult position. We are closely watched. We have many rivals. Here in this town teaching is almost in its infancy. I have to keep up my school. . . . As for you, you're not suited to this part of the country. I didn't see it at first. People had to come and tell me. Those were only rumors. But they will go and spread them elsewhere, reports will have to be drawn up. You understand, Mademoiselle Pascal?"

But apparently Marie did not. She bowed her head; her face, lowered, seemed to be void of a glance. A thousand blurred pictures rose from the depths of her heart, scarcely formed and chasing each other insanely across her vision. Her room . . . her class . . . the public garden seen from her window . . . a child skipping rope in the garden . . . the little red mouth moving over words . . . and those flower-like

words that blossom on the lips of young girls in fairy tales. . . . Then the corner of the room where her desk stood . . . that bending, materially experienced, of her body before the table. . . .

She must leave! The command had fallen like a stone upon her. It wrenched and ravaged all the certitudes of her life, it shattered her vision into a thousand fragments. Annette's face raised toward her, serene, pure, fresh. . . . That day she had read Iphigenia's prayer . . . when she had understood . . . and sorrow had shown in her brown, luminous eyes. . . . But Marie must go!

The word stirred up new visions. As through a nightmare there were endless avenues, bare rooms. . . . She must go—but where? Where? Tears choked her, and she allowed them to stream down her thin face in the presence of the other, who stared dully. Before this unexpected collapse, the Principal remained embarrassed, immured in her solitude, not knowing what to do or say to bring this conversation to an end. Then, stiffening suddenly against this menace to her tranquillity, she uttered faltering words that were almost commands:

"Ask for your transfer. The Inspector was very much surprised at your refusing Paris. Ask for it, yes, ask for it. That will put a stop to everything. Go ahead, do it!"

Marie Pascal rose. She wished to cry out, as though they were snatching away her right to happiness. But she felt that she was powerless; that she was under suspicion, as though defiled by a crime or worse, by something weightier still, a thing almost shameful; that all this would be made filthy, that perhaps it was being made filthy even now. Did not the words spoken by the woman guarding the good name of her establishment give Marie to understand as much? She loathed this egregious accomplice of the established order, whose sallow hands punctuated her "Go ahead, do it!" with little gestures of fright, as she comically beat the air twelve inches away from the table strewn with papers. What had she and this wretched woman in common?

She forced back her tears, emerged from shame and passivity. For a moment she was that small Marie Pascal, who, determined to escape from a whole social order, sat in her native village studying at a wooden

table, beside the low window from which rows of beets seemed to stretch endlessly towards far horizons. And she was that Marie Pascal who, at Sèvres, while her comrades sought amusement, stayed at home, bent over her books, working stubbornly . . .

"It is monstrous. It is unjust. I shall never consent."

The blood rushed to the flabby face. The hands, shaken by sudden tremors, rose. A dazed, scared glance sought Marie:

"You will hurt me, Mademoiselle Pascal. You will be wishing to cause me trouble. . . . You will expose this house to malevolence. It is impossible! Do think it over! As for me, I know my part: I know what course is left to me. But I would wish to avoid it. I ask you, Mademoiselle Pascal. . . ."

"I shall see the Inspector."

"I went to the Inspector's office first of all, before speaking to you. He knows everything. He approves of the stand I have taken. Let us put a stop to this gossip. Who knows what people would say, about you—about everything? . . ."

Scurrilous though the menace was, Marie felt it possible.

"Madame Rieu threatened to show one of your letters to the Inspector," the Principal confessed at last. "I calmed her by telling her that you were asking to be transferred."

Marie understood everything that a mother's jealousy had been able to disfigure. She felt that she could never clear herself of suspicion. Annette was lost. Marie surrendered. There was no revolt left in her glance, but a sort of pathetic bewilderment, as she looked at the stranger, who was shabbily re-enacting her part, with its necessary fears and its inevitable cruelties.

She rose. There was nothing to do but follow the administrative routine, write the official letters. There was nothing to do but to follow the road elsewhere, to say farewell.

She lost consciousness of her grief. She felt drained of all emotion, in that state of anaemic exhaustion that follows the last ordeal of an examination, when all need to use one's will is past and one has but to wait.

As she went out, she bumped into a little table laden with piles of report-books. One pile fell to the ground. She stooped to pick it up, like a servant,

with the same humility of gesture. And, as she saw such meekness, the Principal was touched. For the second time, a human emotion rose within her, something kindred to pity trembled in the blue, dull eyes, in the glance that looked worn-out and as though dirty. The voice hemmed and hawed, sought to speak. The soft hands released the ends of the little shawl. It happened so rapidly that Marie did not find time to be astonished.

Those hands, which had never once during nine years even touched her hands, were laid upon her shoulders. Against her cheek, she felt the other's lifeless face; and the dead lips were joined in the compassionate gesture of a kiss.

LII

SHE crept along the corridor like a wounded beast. Instinctively she fled to her lair, not to the empty apartment but to the empty classroom, where Annette's image still hovered.

Perhaps everything might still be saved. She need only see her chiefs, explain. The accusations of Madame Rieu, under suspicion herself, would be soon confounded. Marie tried to recall her words in the incriminating letter, a single message sent to the child on a day of grievous distress. She exhausted herself as she strove to re-create the sentences.

She was caught in a vortex, it sucked at her vitals, whirled her down toward an abyss. She thought of deaths that came suddenly upon one, of swoons that she had never experienced; she sat down at her desk, stared at the empty benches before her.

She remembered writing to Annette, one evening, after a visit during which they had been spied upon; she remembered her sense of revolt when Madame Rieu had forced her to make the child suffer. Into her vision swam the white rectangle of paper; she could have given its exact dimensions; she could have evoked the day's stormy end, the heavy clouds overhanging the still trees in the square, the trees themselves, heavy with silence, awaiting rain.

But the phrases written? The words? "*My little child.*" Had she written: "My little child"? Had she spoken as though in the depths of her soul? What words could serve to incriminate her? How had Marie, to quote the mother's evidence, fostered an "unhealthy exaltation" in the child?

She repeated these two words to herself, bruised herself upon them. She was filled with revolt and humiliation, not only because of an accusation from without, but also because of what was fermenting in herself, what was rising to defile the radiant pictures and outraging the deepest, most frightful part of the anguish she had suffered.

She rose, paced the room.

She was consuming the space between window and door; and whenever she stood in front of the wide casements, she faced the placid splendor of the heavens. Air, nature, quietude! She longed for her native village, for the huge bare rooms, for everything that was not her existence here.

"The hidebound life of small towns," Dominque Allary had said, "where there is no room for anything

save that passion of the mummified which is obsession."

The words echoed within her. Was her passion for Annette sprung of such feelings?

Now she was spoiling the motives of her love, belittling it. And she felt that even though she stayed in Amiens next year, disarmed suspicion and rendered threats futile, within her heart there would always be self-suspicion, and a shaken faith in her love. Further, even if Annette were restored to Marie, the child could never be truly restored within her own soul.

"Servility! Servility!"

She murmured the words, striving to shake off the evidence, to judge strictly for herself, to resist all external influence. But a whole part of her being already felt guilty and condemned. She knew that she would not struggle, that she did not have the strength to struggle. . . .

Ay, she had no other strength save that required to walk back slowly between the rows of desks, to lay her hands on the carved, ink-stained wood on which Annette had laid her hands; no energy save that re-

quired to raise the top and to look once and again at her name carved fervently: "Marie."

But this time the familiar syllables condemned her. Would Annette have called secretly, thus, to one in whom she saw merely a mother after her own heart? What was there so unconsciously troublous about such innocence?

So: She was suspecting Annette? She was favoring everything that suspected and accused the child?

"Marie!"

She closed down the top forever on this word, studiously carved. No one would ever know that there, in a small square of wood, amid an odor of peppermint bonbons, a single carved word had so bitterly disturbed a woman's heart. Annette herself would never know.

No strength? Ah, but Marie had this strength: she accepted her condemnation. She would leave the child. She would spare Annette what she, Marie, had suffered during these last few minutes. The child would keep a spotless picture of her. She would believe that Mademoiselle Pascal had been appointed to Paris and nothing would ruffle her innocence. She would know

neither the mother's accusation, nor the suspicion which, for a second, made Marie waver.

Marie went out into the corridor. Now the whole great house was empty. The little presences had escaped. Tomorrow was Commencement Day. Upstairs, a maid was sweeping; Marie could hear the rhythmical swish of her broom. In the deserted court, the birds piped cheerily, free, at last, from the frightening clamor of the children. How fiercely the sun beat down! Could there really be so much sunshine in the world?

Marie leaned against the door, gazed once more at this room which had enclosed her happiness. Wintry mornings when the child came in, her face, red from the cold, growing redder still as she greeted her . . . and that blue day, the first day of spring, when she had laid on Marie's table the great branch of hawthorn that had torn her little hands . . . and so many days . . . and every day. . . . Then, beyond Annette, all the other little girls, her companions . . . and still further away, all the little pupils of the years before, whom Annette had driven from her mind, but who, in this supreme instant, suddenly

reappeared. Spectres out of the past. Nine years Marie had taught there. . . .

What remained of all this effort, all this life? What had she received in return for the tender care she had lavished, for the countless trials she had borne, before her heart had settled upon its choice? For how many mothers had she built the happiness of subsequently finding in their child a comrade, or, better still perhaps, a friend? How many of her words had opened human souls? She remembered how she used to tell them: "You must learn to love your mothers. Do not do as so many families; do not live with yours as habitual strangers. We are apt to lose sight of what we are accustomed to. Learn to be attentive, considerate. Keep your eyes open!"

What had she received in exchange for what she had given?

She was going away alone. The mothers always took back their children. In exchange for her priceless services, they had offered Marie merely the temptation of choosing, the peril of her choice and the bitterness of dispossession. These little souls straining towards her, she had nourished with the most inti-

mate part of her soul; she had fulfilled her duties diligently, and, the time of nourishment finished, she was being dismissed like a mercenary.

Never to see Annette again!

"Well, there is all life!" she protested. "One day she will be free, she will break the fetters that bind her, she will come back to me."

But she knew very well that the child would not come back; that in a few years, perhaps sooner, she would have no place in Annette's heart, loyal though it was, save as a vague, venerated figure; that other influences would act upon Annette, modifying her to such a point that she would become alien to Marie; finally that life would open out before Annette. . . .

Down at the end of the corridor, under the wide arch of the stairway, the coat-racks stood against the wall in a long line; in the half-darkness, a soft, whitish shape, dangling from a peg, looked like a broken puppet. A smock that had been forgotten. . . .

Yielding to the dictates of an orderly mind, or perhaps attracted to the empty symbol of a smock which once clothed a child, Marie took it down. The material, distended by the peg, was rumpled in front. Marie

smoothed the embroidered yoke, looked for the name inside, and stopped dead. Then, suddenly, making sure she was unobserved, she rolled the material up into the smallest possible package, which she concealed and carried off, tightly pressed against her heart.

LIII

MADEMOISELLE WEIL-LÉVY took Marie's arm authoritatively and dragged her through the crowd swarming out of the big suburban school where the Commencement Exercises had taken place. It had been a solemn affair, with a long speech by the Mayor, a knot of important officials in uniform, music by the town philharmonic societies, and the heat and holiday crowd which gave the school ceremony the air of an agricultural show.

"Come along, I have a cab. I cannot walk that far. I'll take you home."

At first, Marie protested, then she allowed herself

to be led. She had sat rigid during the whole interminable function, hidden in the last row on the stage, keying herself up to offer her usual front to her colleagues.

Nevertheless, Mademoiselle Hatsfeld had boomed in her great, cordial voice: "You are certainly in bad need of a rest!" And, as she was bidding Marie farewell, she had inclined towards her with a sudden gesture and kissed her cheek.

Mademoiselle Weil-Lévy spoke no word as the taxi rolled on. For the last time Marie looked at the dusty avenue with its summer coat of dirty gray. Soon winter would be daubing it with black. . . . And that sullen, disinherited country was dear to her heart.

"I hear that you're leaving us," Mademoiselle Weil-Lévy said at last, "that you've been transferred to Paris."

There was no curiosity in her voice, Marie felt that quite clearly. But immediately she understood why Mademoiselle Hatsfeld had bidden her a noisy farewell and why a few colleagues had glanced at her with surprise. The Principal had spoken in order to make Marie's decision irrevocable or perhaps to antic-

ipate any astonishment at her absence the following term.

"Yes," Marie answered.

Silence again. Mademoiselle Weil-Lévy's dull face was pale as ashes. Looking at her, Marie could not stop thinking of those logs of green oak which kept her warm in winter in the Midi, when she was filling her first post. She recalled how slowly they burned and how they hid their embers under a cindery veil; let a draught blow and raise the ashes, she thought, and she would see that face shining there.

"I can guess. No doubt everything is all right. One must not suffer," said a consumed voice close to her.

Marie did not reply at once.

"Will you do me the pleasure of taking tea with me? It may be our farewell meal. I am going to have an operation."

"An operation!" Marie exclaimed. She was amazed. For, absorbed as she had been by her passion, she had never given a passing thought to the mysterious illness from which Mademoiselle Weil-Lévy suffered.

"I put it off as long as I could . . . I did not want

to give up my classes before the end of the year. The doctor says it is extremely urgent. But it is an operation I would have wished to avoid."

Marie dared no longer question her. It was Mademoiselle Weil-Lévy who concluded:

"I have cancer of the womb."

Marie looked up. The ashen face maintained its calm; the voice, indeed, had betrayed no emotion.

"Are you certain?" Marie asked. "You're not mistaken. . . ."

She was protesting, offering the helpful lies men use to lull sorrow to sleep. A feeble smile—the first Marie had ever known—distended the discolored lips.

"Please, please!" Mademoiselle Weil-Lévy said. "There's nothing so frightful about it. It's simply that I'm weak enough to dread the operation. And it's not the pain; it's the humiliation. . . ."

She was fumbling for words, not daring to invoke her modesty and that monastic reserve which made her suffer intolerable woe at the idea of being laid bare before a stranger's eyes even on an operating-table.

"This woman may die," Marie thought, "and here

she is thinking of my distress." Then: "She hopes that I am ripe for conversion," she added, "she hopes to lay God in my arms empty of Annette." She drew herself up, stiffened; she was hurt; she regretted that she had accepted the proffered company.

They entered the convent; once again Marie saw the two rooms under the roof, open to the sky. Within, the huge crucifix spread its black cross over the narrow bed. In the sitting-room, rows of books on shelves lined a whole partition; on the other side, the table had been pushed against the wall and covered with a table-cloth, set for tea. Marie noticed with surprise that there were two cups.

"I expected to bring you back," Mademoiselle Weil-Lévy added, "perhaps I had need of you, too."

"But you need no one," Marie said. "Have you not your God?"

For the second time the ashen face betrayed an emotion. It seemed about to dissolve; then a rush of blood restored its pale light.

"Yes," Mademoiselle Weil-Lévy replied.

She had risen in order to put the water on to boil; as she turned her head, she spoke:

"I needed to help you, or at least to try to do so. At school, we're all so deeply engrossed in the same tasks. And we never exchange a true word—I mean one of those words that touch the soul. You would never have told me the slightest thing in confidence, if chance had not brought us together here, if I had not been forced to see you, to gauge your suffering—and your power of love—by your distraction."

She poured water on the tea-leaves, put out the lamp. The room smelled of alcohol, that poor odor which companies the lives of the solitary, condemned to furnished rooms, playing host in borrowed lodgings. Marie reflected that she was about to quit the shelter she had found for the last nine years; that she would once more become the lodger, bandied about from one boarding-house to another before she found a place in which to settle her life again.

Mademoiselle Weil-Lévy had returned to the table; she was busy pouring tea, passing Marie the plate of biscuits, opening the paper-covered jam pot. But now that they sat face to face, words became impossible again. A vast silence lay between them, broken only

by the familiar tinkle of a spoon in a cup, the dry crunching of cakes. Mademoiselle Weil-Lévy ate slowly, her thin jaws protruding. Her pale, salient ears rose from between hair too tightly drawn. The long nose inclined towards the mouth. Only her lowered eyes were beautiful, with their heavy rounded pupils.

"Your appointment begins next autumn?"

"I think so."

"What school?"

"I don't know."

Embarrassed after the first advances, both retreated within themselves.

"When is your operation?" Marie asked in her turn.

"At the end of next week."

"Here?"

"No, at Neuilly."

Perhaps they would never be together again. Mademoiselle Weil-Lévy might so easily die. And as for Marie, it was certain she would go away. She sought to arrange a possible meeting.

"Will you allow me to come and see how you are getting on? I have several formalities to attend to in Paris. I shall no doubt be going there before the end of the month."

It was only at the very end of the visit, as Marie rose to go, that Mademoiselle Weil-Lévy could trust herself to speak. She crossed the room to fetch a small copy of the *Imitation of Christ*. Half-turned toward the book shelf, she said:

"You won't suffer too much, will you? The heart finds it so difficult to unlearn, and we hanker after our happiness so long. But perhaps peace will come to you. Ah, why can we not love children as nuns love the sick! It is never one patient or the other but all of them; and the one who leaves is at once replaced by the newcomer. For they love only their distress, their suffering, their illness. We ought to love children only for their need of us and their ignorance."

She handed the little book to Marie.

"Perhaps it will bring you comfort. And then, everything is not finished for you, even here below, even in the domain of your grief. Hope is left to you."

"Hope?" Marie echoed.

And she thought of the little smock which she had packed in her bag that morning while she shed such tears as mothers weep over the clothes of their dead children.

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